NEVER SAY HERO

AN
OH. MY. GODS
NOVELLA

TERA LYNN CHILDS

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Thank Yous

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ONE

Griffin Blake sat in the reception room outside Hera’s office and tried not to fidget. There were no magazines to read, no wall-mounted TV displaying the news, no other would-be supplicants waiting their turn. Nothing to focus on but his own thoughts, and they weren’t very good company at the moment.

After waiting two hours for an audience with the queen of the gods—after waiting two days to even get an appointment to wait—he was going half out of his mind.

He didn’t blame Hera for keeping him waiting. He wouldn’t be surprised if she kept him waiting for weeks. Time meant next-to-nothing to an Olympian. In her mind, a life of never-ending purgatory was no more than he deserved.

In his mind, too.

When he first learned that the gods might finally be willing to hear his plea to have his parents’ smoting reversed, he autoported to Olympus immediately. He jumped at the chance to make his every single birthday, dandelion, and shooting star wish since he was seven finally come true.

He hadn’t felt hope like this since the day his parents vanished from the face of the earth more than ten years ago. If there was even the remotest possibility that he could bring them back—that he might once again feel his mother’s arms around him and see his father’s smiling face—he didn’t want to wait one millisecond longer than necessary.

Hera, apparently, was in no rush.

Griffin didn’t care. He could wait. He would sit there until eternity and beyond if he had to. Whatever it took.

Hera’s assistant—a middle-aged descendant of the queen herself, with wild red hair and a kind smile—cleared her throat.

“The goddess will see you now,” she told him.

His heart raced as he leapt to his feet.

“Thank you, Agnes.”

She looked over her glasses at him, her brows drawn together with worry. Or maybe judgment. Okay, sure. Maybe wearing jeans and a rugby shirt wasn’t the most formal way he could greet the goddess. But his impulsive autoporting from the ice cream parlor on Serfopoula hadn’t included a pit stop to change clothes.

His legs wobbled slightly as he crossed to the door. It felt like he’d just finished a race and his muscles had turned to pudding.

And he had the sweaty palms to match. What if they were too slippery to turn the handle? He wiped them on his jeans. But before he could even reach out to try, the door swung open.

Heart pounding even faster, he took a calming breath and stepped inside.

The door slammed shut behind him.

Hera sat behind a massive white marble desk dotted with turquoise and gold accessories. The room glowed with light from the wall of windows beside

the desk, softened on its way in by breezy curtains.

The goddess looked just as he remembered—not surprising since the gods didn't age. Dark hair coiled into a loose bun. Wearing a traditional-style gown—this one in a rich peacock blue—with a golden brooch securing each shoulder. Face molded into a severe expression.

She didn't look up from the parchment she was studying.

Griffin shifted uncomfortably. Should he stand there and wait to be invited over? Should he sit? Should he hold his breath?

Thinking it would be awkward to keep standing just inside the door, he decided to sit. He crossed to the pair of gilded chairs that faced Hera's desk. The chair nearest the windows was occupied by a giant, glorious peacock.

He chose the unoccupied chair. As he sat, the peacock studied him.

Griffin tried to ignore the bird and focused his attention on Hera. He wanted to be ready the moment she decided to speak. Whenever that would be.

Which might be another eternity.

The queen kept working as if he weren't there. Without looking up, she reached for a peacock feather quill that sat in a marble stand and dipped it carefully in a turquoise inkpot.

Waiting was killing him. With every skritch-scratch of the quill, he grew more impatient. More anxious.

Maybe she hadn't noticed him enter. Sure, she had been the one to open and close the door telekinetically—no way would Agnes dare to do that herself—but that didn't mean Hera had actually seen him come in.

He cleared his throat.

Her focus did not waver.

Skritch-scratch, skritch-scratch, skritch-scratch.

Finally, when he couldn’t stand it any longer, he decided to risk speaking. But as he opened his mouth to make his presence known, the peacock screamed. A sharp, ear-piercing screech.

When Griffin looked at it, the bird knowingly shook its head.

He took that as a sign and closed his mouth.

After what felt like an actual infinity, Hera finally set her quill back into the stand. She rolled up the parchment and handed it to the peacock. The bird turned and took off, flying out the open window into the bright blue Olympian sky.

When Griffin looked back at the desk, he found the queen’s dark eyes intently focused on him. It took all his willpower not to react to her scrutiny.

She didn’t speak. Didn’t blink. Didn’t do anything but stare.

He shifted uncomfortably again. He had to say something.

“Great goddess, my name is Griff—”

She cut him off with a humorless laugh.

“I know who you are, Griffin Blake.” Her eyes narrowed. “How could I ever forget the one who stole my son’s immortality?”

Her words hit him like a slap. He knew he deserved the goddess queen’s anger—had been expecting it, even. But he hadn’t been prepared for her to say it so bluntly.

His mind flashed back to that afternoon so many years ago, when he and Nicole had snuck into the baby’s room and fed it ambrosia. They thought they were doing a good thing. The gods and goddesses loved ambrosia, but the poor baby never got a taste. It seemed only fair.

At seven years old, they hadn’t realized there might be a reason.

“We didn’t know,” he whispered. “It’s no excuse, but we didn’t know.”

Punishment had been swift and severe. Not for Griffin or Nicole. For their parents. Hers had been banished from Olympus and the hematheos world, forced to live in the nothos world among ordinary humans. His had been smoted from existence.

For more than a decade, Griffin believed their fates were irreversible. Carved in stone, never to be lifted or altered.

But then everything changed. Thanks to a quick trip through time and some other mythological hijinks, the exile order on Nicole’s parents was reversed. And Griffin learned that the gods—Zeus in particular—might be willing to grant him the same favor. He was the only living descendant of Hercules, after all, and it was widely known that great Herc was Zeus’s favorite son.

So he had sought an audience with the god king, who swiftly told him—three days later, when Griffin finally got to see him—that none but Hera could grant that request. The other Olympians wouldn’t dare overrule her on this.

Now Griffin sat across a vast marble desk from the only being who could make more than ten years of wishes come true. Holding his breath.

“You are correct,” she said slowly. “Ignorance is no excuse. Nor does it annul your mistake.”

“I wish I could.” Griffin leaned forward. “I would give anything—do anything—to fix the past.”

Her expression snapped into a glare, fierce eyes spearing into him for daring to interrupt her. When he sat back in his chair, she continued.

“Yet, I must acknowledge that you were but children.” She leaned back in her own chair, decorated with ornately carved lilies and dotted with ruby pomegranate seeds. “But a few years older than my boy was at the time.”

Griffin could still picture him, the little toddler with golden curls, sleeping like an angel in his gilded crib. Could still hear the chimes twinkling in the soft breeze. Could still smell the honey-sweet nectar as he delivered the drops to the baby.

So many lives had changed in that instant.

“Yes, I was a child,” he told the queen, “but I was responsible. I am responsible.” He leaned forward again. “My parents should not have been punished in my place.”

Hera pursed her lips. “Ah, finally, we arrive at the purpose of your visit.”

Griffin drew in a sharp breath. He wanted to ask for the reversal outright, but he didn’t know how the queen would respond. Would she be angry? Irritated? Amused? He didn’t want to say the wrong thing in the wrong way. But he didn’t even know if there was a right thing or a right way.

In the end, impatience won out. Griffin had waited too long already to play any more games. He decided to try straightforward honesty.

“Your highness, I would like to request a—”

“Reversal,” the queen finished. “Yes, I know.”

His breath whooshed out of him. Of course she knew. She was the master of psychospection, after all. His own ability with that power was nonexistent in comparison. She’d probably been reading his mind since long before he walked through her door.

He’d put himself through all that dread for nothing. Now all he felt was relief. Everything was out in the open. Now he just had to cross his fingers and hope.

Instead of commenting on his request, Hera pulled open a desk drawer and reached inside. A moment later, she popped a small amber-colored candy into her mouth.

Griffin sat on his hands as he waited for her response. His patience was at the raggedy edge, but he would sit there until he turned to dust if it meant a chance to get his parents back.

Moving the candy to one side of her mouth, the queen finally spoke.

“Most people misunderstand smoting,” she said. “They equate the punishment with death or destruction.”

“It’s not?”

Over the years, Griffin had wondered. He’d been so young when it all happened that he didn’t know enough to ask what smoting actually meant. Aunt Lili certainly hadn’t explained it to him. She was lost in her own grief while struggling with her new responsibility to raise a child.

Then, as he grew older and had questions, Lili wanted to talk less and less about his parents. He knew she still loved his mother, her half-sister, as much as he did. But it was as if she wanted to forget what happened and the pain it caused.

He didn’t blame her. If he could forget his guilt, he would.

“Not at all,” Hera explained. “Smoting is more of a state of… suspended animation.”

“Like how Han was frozen in carbonite?” Griffin asked.

The queen frowned at him. “I do not understand the reference. What is han, and where is carbonite?”

“It doesn’t matter.” He scooted to the edge of his chair again. “Is it possible to reverse? Can someone be—” He swallowed hard. “—unsmoted?”

The queen shrugged, as if he’d asked her how she liked the weather on Mt. Olympus. As if this weren’t the most important question he had ever asked in his life.

“Of course,” she said, before biting down on the candy with a sharp crunch.

With those two words, Griffin's heart erupted in his chest. Hope exploded in his mind.

He tried to remind himself not to get too excited. Even if it was possible, that didn't mean it was probable. The Olympians were famous for grudge-holding.

But learning that the thing he had wanted more than anything for most of his life, the thing he'd thought beyond impossible, was actually attainable, was almost more than he could process. He rubbed his hands over his face as he listened to the queen crunch her candy into oblivion.

When she seemed to be done, he looked up.

She was studying him again.

"It seems we are at an intersection," Hera said, as she slipped another candy into her mouth. "You want something from me. And I want something from you."

"Anything," he blurted.

"Even help my son recover his immortality?"

Griffin jerked back. "How would—" He shook his head. "Could it—"

The queen watched him with steady eyes, casually sucking on her ambrosia candy while he considered her question.

"Is that even possible?" he finally managed to ask.

"Only one being has the power to return the gift you stole." She glanced away from him, out the open window. "The Oracle of Delphi."

The Oracle of Delphi.

A shiver of… not fear, exactly, but trepidation shot down Griffin's spine. The Oracle was not one to mess with.

“My son, Calix, is thirteen this year,” Hera said.

Her voice sounded sad, almost wistful. Not a trait often associated with the Olympian queen.

“At last of age,” she explained, “to seek an oracle’s quest.”

Maybe it wasn’t sadness he had heard in the goddess’s voice. Maybe it was fear. The Oracle’s quests were notoriously impossible. Notoriously dangerous. Notoriously notorious. Few had sought them out. Fewer still had successfully completed them.

“Guide Calix through the ordeal,” Hera said, bringing Griffin’s attention back to her. “Accompany him on the quest. Protect him from harm. See him succeed, and you shall see your parents once again.”

Could it really be that simple?

Not that an Oracle’s quest was ever simple. But the goddess queen’s deal seemed straightforward. Help Hera’s son complete an Oracle’s quest to regain his immortality, and Griffin’s parents’ smoting would be reversed.

Simple as that.

So when she asked, “Do you accept?” he didn’t hesitate.

“Yes.” He grinned. “Yes, and thank you.”

The queen smiled almost softly.

“Do not thank me until the deed is done. You may be the descendant of a hero, but mayhaps even Heracles himself could not complete this task.”

“I will,” Griffin insisted as he pushed to his feet. “I’ll do whatever it takes.”

He held out his hand and was only a little surprised when the queen took it in hers.

“Good luck, Griffin Blake.” She squeezed his hand. “You shall need it.”

There was that shiver down his spine again. Griffin ignored it. For the first time in more than a decade, he had hope. He had a deal with a goddess to get his parents back.

No matter what it took, he would succeed.

He wouldn’t let his parents down again.

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TWO

“You’re lucky, you know?” Agnes smiled up at Griffin as he walked out of Hera’s office. “The queen is in a particularly good mood today.”

That was a good mood? Griffin didn’t want to see her on a bad day.

“Did she get a nice offering or something?” he asked.

“No…” Agnes gave him a conspiratorial look. “She spent all morning finalizing a smoting order. Meting out punishments always cheers her up.”

Griffin tried to smile, but he had a feeling it looked more like a wince.

Of course ordering life-altering punishments put Hera in a good mood. He shouldn’t be surprised. He just had to hope that helping Calix complete his quest would make her happy for a much less panic-inducing reason.

And the sooner he started, the sooner he would see his parents again.

“Do you know where I can find the queen’s son?” he asked.

Agnes beamed. “I sure do.”

When she didn’t move or say anything more, he asked, “Could you tell me?”

“I could,” she agreed.

“Would you?” Griffin flashed her his most charming smile. “Please.”

At that, she winked and then turned to one of several piles of papers stacked high along the edge of her desk. She shuffled through the tower, clearly looking for one paper in particular.

“Now, where did I put that…?”

Griffin shifted from one foot to the other. He was eager to get going. Judging by the state of her desk, Agnes didn’t seem to be the most organized person he’d ever met. That title belonged to the Academy’s librarian, Mrs. Philipoulos—she could find a scroll in the Library of Alexandria archives in two seconds flat.

Agnes, on the other hand, was having trouble finding something on her own desk. The longer she took, the more impatient Griffin grew. Maybe he was better off wandering around the palace until he found the boy.

Just as he was about to call off the search, Agnes yanked a sheet out of the stack.

“Aha!” She waved it over her head. “Found it.”

The great discovery appeared to be a map. Griffin could make out the outlines of several buildings, some rock formations, and what looked like a giant pool.

He would recognize that place blindfolded. It was a map of Mt. Olympus itself.

Agnes set the map down on the desk and started tracing her fingertip over the surface.

“Let’s see…,” she hummed. “Where has that boy gotten to now?”

Griffin stepped closer to get a better view. As he did, he saw the map showed more than shapes and spaces. More than just the buildings and grounds of the Olympic headquarters. There were dozens of small symbols in varying colors scattered across the map. Each had a small label.

He was just leaning in to read one of them when the symbol moved. An owl's head, labeled Αθηνη, slowly made its way along one of the many hallways in the palace. Athena was in the building.

Before he could identify any other symbols, Agnes stabbed her finger to a spot.

"There he is!" She grinned up at Griffin. "You'll find Calix in the arcade."

Griffin blinked. "There's an arcade on Mt. Olympus?"

"Of course, silly," Agnes said with a dismissive pshhh as she rolled up the map. "It's been here for ages."

In all the years his family had lived here, he never knew that. Maybe if he and Nicole had video games to play, they wouldn't have been tempted to make up their own adventures—like the one that led to this whole mess in the first place.

"Take a right in the hall." She gestured to the door. "Then turn left at the dead end. The door will be right in front of you."

"Thanks," he told her with a grateful smile.

"Any time." She waved the rolled-up map at him. "Have fun!"

He nodded and set off on his quest.

Griffin followed the directions Agnes had given him and found himself not in a room full of video game machines, but stepping out into the open air. Into the palace's manicured central courtyard.

Mt. Olympus was a massive complex. So, of course, the main courtyard was huge. Probably almost as big as the entire quad at the Academy.

From where he stood, Griffin could see groves of fruit and nut trees with flower-lined paths winding through them. The sound of flowing water suggested there was a stream or a fountain—or both—somewhere within.

Griffin turned at the clop-clop sound of hooves. A silver-winged pegasus emerged out of a grove, chomping on a freshly plucked apple. It startled when it saw Griffin. In a flurry of wings and hooves, it dropped the apple and leapt, flapping its wings to take off into the sky.

When his family lived on the mountain, Griffin used to come out here to play all the time. No corner had been left unexplored. He'd been gone for so long that he forgot many of the magical things that lived and happened on Olympus.

But he wasn't here to spot an elusive rainbow-horned monocerata. Or to wander down memory lane. He had a mission.

"In the arcade, huh?" Griffin mused to himself.

A memory surfaced of a lesson on architecture in his Greek history class. An arcade wasn't just a place to play video games. It was also a kind of hallway made of arches and columns.

Which pretty much described the colonnade that lined the courtyard on all sides.

Trusting Agnes's map—and her directions—Griffin made his way along the perimeter, searching for Hera's son.

Halfway around the arcade, he turned a corner and spotted blond curls peeking out from behind a column. Darker blond than he remembered, but

they could belong to none other than Hera's son.

His heart pounded into his throat.

He hadn't expected this feeling. Guilt. Definitely guilt.

It was bad enough to face Hera. Her anger, he could almost deal with.

Now he had to look into the eyes of the boy whose immortality he'd snatched away. Griffin had been dealing with the consequences of his actions for more than a decade, but never quite as face-to-face as this.

Hopefully, the fact that he was there to help make things right would count for something.

Part of him wanted to stand there forever, frozen in an in-between moment. Between the past and the future, the cause and the effect. Between the half-life he'd been living and the one he never even dared to hope for.

But a bigger, stronger, more desperate part of him was willing to risk anything—his life, his freedom, and certainly his comfort—to get his parents back. So, with a deep breath for courage, Griffin stepped out of the shadows and confronted the original victim of his childhood mistake.

The boy—now almost a young man of thirteen—didn't notice Griffin's approach. With his face buried in a book, he seemed too preoccupied with his reading to notice anything.

Griffin cleared his throat.

Calix startled so severely that he dropped his book and fell off the balustrade he'd been sitting on.

"Omigoddess!" the boy exclaimed as he scrambled to his feet. "I didn't hear you walk up."

"Clearly," Griffin said with a smile. He picked up the book and noted the title. "The Lost Poems of Sappho, huh? Any good?"

Calix's face positively lit up. "They are amazing!"

"Better than Meleager?"

"Pfft!" Calix waved his hand dismissively. "Meleager is a hack. Sappho is the master."

Griffin smiled as he handed the book back to Calix. He liked the boy immediately. "Too bad the nothos world can't read her complete works."

"Right?!" he replied with a wide-eyed grin. Calix clutched the book to his chest as if it were his most precious possession. "I'm Calix. I haven't seen you around here before."

"I haven't lived here for a while now." He hesitated, letting his courage build up just a little more, before saying, "I'm Griffin."

He held his breath, waiting for recognition to dawn in Calix's bright green eyes. Waiting for the delight to be replaced by anger. Surely the name of the thief who stole his immortality had been burned into his mind like the sear of Hephaestus's forge.

But instead of lashing out, Calix smiled and held out his hand. "Nice to meet you, Griffin."

Griffin stared at the outstretched hand. Maybe the boy hadn't heard him right. Maybe there were too many other Griffin's in his life.

"Blake," he said. "I'm Griffin Blake."

"Okay…" Calix gave him a mischievous look. "I'm Calix Aigophagos."

Griffin was so thrown by the boy's response that he forgot what he was so nervous about.

"Aigophagos?" Griffin echoed. "Goat-eater?"

Calix beamed. "One of my mom's epithets. She hates when I use it. So, of course, I use it all the time."

Griffin laughed. He had to admire the boy's irreverence.

Maybe it was selfish, but he was relieved that Calix didn't seem to know who he was. Didn't know that Griffin was responsible for his mortality.

Had Hera never told him how it happened? Or maybe she'd just neglected to mention the identity of the thieves. Knowing her, she'd probably forbidden anyone on Olympus from ever speaking their names.

Griffin could explain the situation to the boy. He should, probably. He didn't want to.

That made him pretty much the opposite of heroic, but some days it was too hard to live up to that legacy. Some days called for making the cowardly choice.

Especially when that made it easier to get what he needed.

"So, speaking of your mom…," Griffin said, bringing the conversation around to his mission. "She asked me to help you."

Calix frowned. "With what?"

"Your quest."

"My what?" The boy stepped back, colliding with the balustrade. "What quest?"

Griffin's stomach sank. Not only did Calix not know about Griffin, he clearly didn't know about Hera's intention to restore his immortality. This was probably part of her plan—to send Griffin in blind, to make everything harder on him. It was no more than he deserved.

For my parents, he reminded himself. A little discomfort was a small price.

He walked over to the balustrade and sat down next to Calix.

"Now that you're thirteen," he began, "Hera thinks you're old enough to seek a quest from the Oracle of Delphi."

Calix's dark blond brows drew into an ever-deeper frown. "For what?"

"To get your immortality back."

Calix went pale as a ghost.

"I didn't…." Calix shook his head.

The boy looked stunned.

Oh no. Did Calix not even know he was mortal? Had it not crossed Hera's mind that her son would want to know he'd lost his immortality? Or had she decided not to tell him for some inscrutable reason?

No wonder he didn't know who Griffin was.

But then Calix said, "I didn't think that was even possible."

Thank Hera! Literally. At least he wouldn't have to explain that.

Griffin hid his relief with a shrug.

"Me neither," he said casually, as if he hadn't been on the verge of a heart attack. "But your mom seems to think so."

Calix stared blankly at his own feet. Griffin could practically see the thoughts racing through the boy's mind. He could only imagine what it felt like to grow up believing you were mortal and then, in an instant, learn that you might be able to regain your stolen immortality. And from a stranger, no less.

As much as the details of Hera's deal had shocked Griffin, it must be blowing Calix's mind even more.

They stayed lost in their thoughts for several minutes. Calix clearly processing the situation. Griffin giving the boy all the processing time he needed. It was the literal least he could do.

The clip-clop of hooves on pavement finally shook Calix out of his thoughts.

“I just….” He looked up at Griffin with the most confused expression. “I never thought….”

“Crazy, right?”

Griffin pushed to his feet. He felt bad for the boy, but he was also eager to get going. The sooner they started, the sooner he got his parents back.

A decade ago wasn’t soon enough.

“What do you say?” he asked. “Ready to do this thing?”

Calix made a weird, mixed-up gesture. Like a cross between a shake, a nod, and a shrug.

Griffin could empathize with the confusion.

“Are you ready?” Calix asked.

Griffin forced a reassuring smile. “As I’ll ever be.”

Calix held the book he’d been reading out in front of him, staring at it like he was trying to ask the great poet herself for answers.

In the end, he nodded—maybe at Sappho, maybe at himself—and said, “Okay. Let’s go.”

Griffin smiled and clapped the boy on the shoulder. His heart raced. He was about to take the first step to getting his parents back. He was both excited by the possibility of success and terrified by the possibility of failure.

But he couldn’t let himself think like that. He had to think positive. Just like when he was at the starting line for a race. He had to picture himself winning. He had to believe he and Calix would succeed.

Anything less was not an option.

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THREE

“We have to climb how many steps?” Calix gasped.

Griffin studied the path before them, a steep, winding staircase carved into the side of a mountain. It was more than a little daunting. From where they stood, he couldn’t see the top of the mountain. Or the top of the stairway. He could only guess at the number of steps that stood between them and the oracle’s cave.

“I don’t know,” he replied. “Looks like maybe two hundred?”

Or five. But he didn’t want to freak the kid out.

For the first time, Griffin was grateful that Phoebe had made stairs a consistent part of their regular training regimen. If he hadn’t been running them by the dozens for the past few months, the climb might have intimidated him.

He might have felt as dismayed as Calix looked.

The boy shook his head. “I can’t.”

“Of course you can,” Griffin insisted.

Calix backed up a step. “I’ll just wait for you here. I think I saw a nice bench back there in the temple. I’m sure Apollo won’t mind if I—”

“You have to seek the quest,” Griffin told him. “That’s how it works.”

“I’m not fit enough.” Calix turned his wide eyes on Griffin. “The only exercise I get is walking the stacks in the library to find another book.”

Griffin hid a wince. He tried to sympathize. Climbing a mountain to seek a quest from one of the scariest beings in all of mythology was no easy task. When the prize was literal immortality, though, wasn’t a little physical effort worth it? Clearly, Calix didn’t think so.

But Griffin hadn’t coached the junior runners’ team for the past three years without learning a thing or three about how to motivate young athletes.

“Look,” Griffin told him, “I know this is going to be hard.”

Calix snorted nervously at the understatement.

“But focus on the reward.” Griffin flashed an encouraging smile. “Think how happy you’ll be when you’ve made it to the top.”

Calix shook his head. “Nope, I’ll be much happier here at the bottom.”

“Think how happy your mom will be when you’ve finished your quest.”

A strange emotion passed across Calix’s face.

“This won’t make her happy,” the boy said. “Nothing I do makes her happy.” He gestured up the mountain. “Killing myself on these steps won’t change that.”

Griffin couldn’t argue with that. It couldn’t be easy having Hera for a mom. But pleasing her wasn’t the only reason for the quest.

“And you’ll have your immortality back,” Griffin reminded him.

Calix gave him a look that was a cross between annoyed and resigned.

Griffin pushed harder. “Isn’t that worth a little mountain climbing?”

The boy stared at the ground for several long seconds before sighing. “I guess so.”

“We can take plenty of breaks along the way,” Griffin promised. “One step at a time.”

Calix lifted his hand to shield his eyes from the sun as he stared up at the mountain. “I wish you could just autoport us.”

Griffin recognized this tactic. A last-ditch effort to put off the inevitable.

“You and me both, buddy,” he replied. “But it’s the oracle’s rules.” He gestured up the mountain. “I guess she thinks you have to earn your quest.”

“That’s so unreasonable,” Calix complained. “Quests are already almost impossible. Why make even getting one almost impossible, too?”

Griffin didn’t have an answer. And he wasn’t about to fight the system. If playing by the oracle’s—and Hera’s—rules got him his parents back, he would be a freaking Olympic altar boy. Whatever it took.

He wanted to give Calix some kind of pep talk. Like, The longer we stand here, the longer it takes. But he had a feeling that would have the opposite effect. Maybe he needed to employ some reverse psychology to get things moving.

“You’re right. It’s a rotten situation.” He turned away from the mountain, gazing out beyond the temple of Apollo to where the blue-green Aegean lapped at the shore. “Maybe we should give up and go home.”

He pretended not to notice as Calix turned to gawk at him.

The boy didn’t jump at the chance to retreat. That was a good sign.

Griffin stared off into the distance, pretending to be lost in thought as he counted down from one hundred. When he got to zero, he looked at Calix. The boy was studying him intensely. Like he was reading Griffin’s mind.

Which he might have been doing… if Calix hadn't lost all of his powers along with his immortality. He no longer had his mother's psychospection —or any of the other dynamotheos abilities.

"Why are you helping me?" Calix asked.

Griffin jerked back. That was not the question he'd expected.

"Because your mom asked me to."

"Obviously," Calix replied. "But what are you getting out of it? What's in it for you?"

A twinge of guilt pinched Griffin in the chest. The boy wasn't wrong.

He thought about lying. Thought about making up some kind of motivation —like Hera had promised him great wealth or power or a gold medal in the next Pythian Games. But Calix deserved to know the full truth. He deserved to know who was helping him and why.

Griffin shifted uncomfortably on the path, the crunch of gravel beneath his sneakers echoing the tight churn of his stomach.

Why was the truth so hard to admit? He just had to get it over with.

"I'm the one who stole your immortality," he blurted.

In an instant, he was both relieved and extremely nervous. It felt good to have the truth out in the open, but there was no going back. He held his breath, waiting to see how the boy would react.

The reaction never came. Calix stood there, his expression unchanged.

Maybe he hadn't understood.

"When you were a baby," Griffin explained, "a friend and I fed you ambrosia, which took your—"

“Yeah, yeah, you and Nicole Matios,” Calix said. “I’ve only heard the story like a billion times. My mom won’t shut up about it.”

Now it was Griffin’s turn to blink and stare. Calix knew? He didn’t seem angry at all.

“I get that you want to make up for what you did,” the boy continued. “But why now? What has my mom promised you?”

Griffin felt the guilt squeeze tighter in his chest. Like he was afraid to say it out loud, afraid that speaking it into the universe would invite the universe to laugh in his face. But he knew he had to. It wasn’t right to keep the reward a secret. Calix deserved to know.

“My parents,” Griffin said softly. “If I help you regain your immortality, she’ll unsmote them.”

He held his breath. He didn’t mean to, didn’t even do it consciously, but as he waited for Calix to respond to that truth bomb, Griffin couldn’t make his lungs work.

After studying Griffin for what felt like forever—especially to someone who was getting increasingly oxygen-deprived with every passing second—Calix shrugged and said, “Okay.”

“Okay?” Griffin blinked.

The boy’s mouth quirked up to one side in an expression that looked both like a smile and a frown. “Okay. As in, let’s do it. I want to help you get your parents back.”

Griffin stood there, mouth hanging open like the gates of Hades, as Calix walked past him and started up the mountain. He didn’t know what surprised him more: that Calix seemed to care more about helping Griffin than getting his own immortality back, or that he was now willingly climbing the steps.

Either way, Griffin wasn’t about to look a Trojan Horse in the mouth. They were back on the path to the oracle, the quest, and the only chance he’d ever had to get his parents back.

Griffin hurried up the steps after Calix.

Calix stood at the entrance to the oracle’s cave, the toes of his hiking boots lined up to the edge between sunlight and shadow. The difference was so stark that there had to be some kind of mystical barrier dividing the two.

“Is this a bad time to mention that I’m afraid of the dark?”

Griffin moved up to stand next to him. “Yeah, I’m not a fan of caves either.”

“You go first,” Calix said a little too brightly.

Normally, Griffin would take that as a challenge. But he didn’t want to leave the boy outside, alone, with a chance to change his mind.

“It’s your quest,” Griffin replied. “You should enter her realm first.”

Calix gave the biggest sigh. Then, without any more prodding on Griffin’s part, the boy took a step forward and disappeared into the shadows.

“Whoa!” he exclaimed from within.

Worried that something dangerous lurked inside, Griffin jumped across the threshold. All kinds of dangerous, mythological monster-starring scenarios played through his mind. Hera was only just now maybe thinking about forgiving him for stealing Calix’s immortality more than a decade ago. She would never forgive him if he let the boy get eaten by a basilisk or mauled by a chimera on the first day of the quest.

The moment Griffin stepped into the cave, though, he knew that Calix's shout wasn't one of fear. It was awe.

All around them, on the entire inside surface of the cave, multi-colored crystals sparkled like they were lit from within. As if every square inch had been covered with prisms.

They had walked into a literal rainbow.

"This is…" Griffin couldn't find the words to explain what he was seeing.

In the end, Calix said it best.

"Whoa."

"Yeah," Griffin agreed. "Whoa."

It was as if color itself came to life and swirled through the air around them.

"Have you ever seen anything so beautiful?" Calix asked, his voice full of wonder.

Griffin shook his head. "No, nev—"

"WHO DARES TO ENTER MY MYSTICAL SANCTUM?"

The booming female voice echoed through the cave, vibrating off the crystals and sounding completely otherworldly. Griffin looked at Calix, who stared back at him with wide eyes. The boy was ready to run.

Say your name, Griffin mouthed.

Calix started to shake his head, but then seemed to change his mind. After blinking several times, he nodded.

"Calix Aigophagos," he called out into the cave.

When he didn't say more, Griffin elbowed him in the arm.

“Son of Hera,” Calix added, “Queen of Olympus.”

Surely that was enough for the oracle.

They stood there, waiting for… something. For her to appear. For her to tell them to go away. For anything.

When she didn’t, Calix elbowed Griffin in the arm.

“Maybe you need to say who you are, too,” he whispered. Then, his voice dropping even lower, he added, “She already knows you’re here.”

Griffin swallowed hard and nodded.

“And Griffin Blake,” he shouted. “Descendant of Ares and—”

He hesitated. Few people knew his secret. A very few. Phoebe. Nicole. His Aunt Lili and Headmaster Petrolas. He wasn’t ashamed of his heroic heritage. More like he was afraid that he couldn’t live up to it. If no one knew, then they couldn’t be disappointed.

But he had a feeling that the oracle wouldn’t stand for half-truths.

“And descendant of,” he continued, “Hercules.”

To his credit, Calix didn’t even blink. Maybe the boy already knew. Or maybe he had a really good poker face.

Apparently, the oracle was satisfied because almost as soon as he named his second ancestor, she spoke again.

“You may enter, Calix Aigophagos, son of Hera, queen of Olympus, and Griffin Blake, descendant of Ares and descendant of Hercules.”

Her voice grew softer as she spoke, and yet somehow more powerful.

“Join me,” she continued, “at the Well of Apollo.”

Calix flashed him a pained look, but before Griffin could even give him an encouraging nudge, the boy started walking in the direction of the voice. Griffin took a deep breath and followed him deeper into the cave.

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FOUR

After leaving the crystal-encrusted space, they walked down a short tunnel that led to a smaller room with chalky-white walls. On the other side of a small pool of water, the surface so still that it looked like glass, sat a woman, just as motionless.

She didn’t look nearly as old as he expected an oracle to be. Her long brown hair flowed around her in gentle waves. Her eyes were closed. Her hands rested on her knees. It looked like she was meditating.

She didn’t seem to realize they had entered her space. She didn’t move or react at all. From across the room, she didn’t even appear to be breathing.

Maybe she hadn’t been the one who invited them to enter. Maybe he needed to make their presence known.

He opened his mouth to speak.

“SILENCE!” Her voice echoed in the chalky chamber.

His mouth snapped shut.

“I know you are here, Griffin Blake,” the woman said without opening her eyes. “I know why you are here.”

He waited for her to continue, but she spoke no more.

Calix looked at Griffin, his eyes wide and uncertain with a thousand questions. Griffin shrugged. He didn't have any idea what was going on, either.

Finally, after what felt like centuries, the woman opened her eyes. If Griffin didn't already know she was an oracle, he would have realized it the moment he saw her eyes. They sparkled like rainbows, like the crystals in the entrance chamber.

Her magical gaze studied Griffin first, then Calix, then Griffin again.

"You seek not a quest," she said to him.

It wasn't a question.

"No," Griffin replied. He gestured at Calix. "I'm here to help."

Her gaze shifted back to the boy.

"You seek not a quest either."

Calix blinked several times. "Um, yeah. I mean, yes, I do. I want a quest."

Her eyes narrowed.

"I want a quest," Calix said again, as if repeating it might make her believe it more. "My mom thinks you can give me one to get my immortality back."

"Hmmm." The oracle nodded, but didn't speak.

Griffin itched to say something. To ask her to get on with giving Calix his quest so Griffin could get on with getting his parents back. But oracles were notoriously temperamental beings. He didn't want to set her off and wind up walking away with a more than impossible quest. Or worse, without a quest at all.

Which was why, when she turned her gaze back on him, he stood still and silent. Unflinching. Never show fear, right?

“Approach,” she commanded. “Each of you, gaze into the Well of Apollo.”

Griffin didn’t hesitate. He stepped up to the pool and looked down into the water. He saw his own reflection and, a moment later, Calix’s reflection next to him.

“The first vision will be that which you most desire,” the oracle said.

A sudden ripple of waves spread across the surface. When the water stilled again, Griffin’s heart thudded. He no longer saw himself or Calix in the reflection. He saw his parents.

They were older than he remembered. His father’s hair was gray at the temples, and his mother’s eyes were lined with wrinkles. But they were smiling and happy. He couldn’t quite explain it, but he just knew that they were waiting for him. Somewhere.

It was such a powerful vision—such a perfect representation of everything he had dreamed of for the last ten years—that he felt tears sting at his eyes.

He quickly blinked them away and looked at Calix. He didn’t know what the boy saw, but whatever vision the water held made him just as emotional. Calix didn’t seem bothered by the tears that streamed down his cheeks.

“The second vision will be that which you most fear,” the oracle said.

Griffin’s stomach dropped. He didn’t want to look into the water. He didn’t want to see his fears. But he knew he had to.

This time, his parents were gone. Instead, he saw only his own reflection. He knew instantly what that meant. What he feared most was a world without his parents. A world where he failed to bring them back, where he remained utterly alone.

He knew that fear was an exaggeration. He wasn’t alone in life. He had Aunt Lili and Phoebe and Nicole and plenty of friends. But without his

parents, it always felt like the biggest piece at the center of the puzzle was missing.

“No!” Calix shouted. “I won’t do it!”

Griffin looked away from his own vision. The boy trembled in fear, his eyes wide and his face pale. Grabbing him by the shoulders, Griffin shook Calix until he looked away from the water.

“Hey, you’re okay, Calix,” he insisted. “It’s just a vision. It’s not real.”

While the boy took several shaky breaths, Griffin held him steady. Trying to share some of his own strength. Finally, Calix’s breathing calmed, and the color began to return to his cheeks. He still shook, but he seemed to be getting the fear under control.

“Thanks,” he whispered.

Griffin nodded and gave his shoulders a quick squeeze before releasing him.

“The final vision,” the oracle said, as if oblivious to what had just happened, “will be that which you must undertake to obtain what you seek.”

This was it. This was the quest.

Griffin waited for Calix to look into the pool before turning his own gaze back to the water. He had thought they came only for Calix’s quest, but Griffin knew instinctively that the oracle also had one for him.

Helping Calix was not his only mission.

When he looked back into the water, he didn’t know what to expect. The image of an object to pursue, maybe. Or of himself doing some series of tasks.

He didn’t expect to see the oracle herself looking up at him.

“The forgiveness you seek,” she began, “can be granted only by the one you have most wronged.”

“Forgiveness?” Griffin shook his head. He didn’t want forgiveness. “What about my parents?”

“They are beyond the limits of my power. Only Hera can reverse her decree.”

Thanks for nothing.

Griffin knew better than to say it out loud. Seriously, why even bother having him look into the water to get a quest if she couldn’t give him what he wanted?

But what else had he expected? If the Olympians—if Zeus himself wasn’t willing to overrule the smoting, why did he think the oracle might?

Which meant that the plan stayed the same. Help Calix on his quest. Then Hera would bring Griffin’s parents back.

“Okay,” he said. “Thank—”

Before he finished his sentence, the oracle vanished from the vision.

Looking up from the water, he glanced around the chamber. She still sat on the other side of the pool, eyes closed again and back in her silent meditation.

Calix was also looking at her across the water.

“Did you get it?” Griffin asked.

The boy turned to face him, blinking in confusion as if he’d forgotten Griffin was even there. “What?”

“Your quest?” Griffin explained. “Did she give you your quest?”

Calix blinked several more times before saying, “Yeah, she did.”

Griffin looked at him, waiting for him to explain.

When he didn't, Griffin asked, "What is it?"

How was he supposed to help if he didn't know what he was helping Calix do?

The boy frowned slightly and tilted his head to the side. "Oh, um… To, uh, undo…." He smiled awkwardly. "To undo Jason's quest."

"What?" Griffin felt his jaw drop.

In the history of mythological quests, there was only one Jason. And that Jason just happened to be Griffin's favorite hero of all time.

"What exactly did she say?"

Calix nodded. "She said I have to return the Golden Fleece to its original home."

Griffin's heart raced. The legend of Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece was, well, legendary. It also took place thousands of years ago. No one knew exactly when, but there was never a time in the written mythological record that didn't include that famous tale.

Even though Griffin had read all the stories about Jason and the Argonauts —more than once—he had no clue where to begin.

He turned back to face the oracle, to ask her to clarify.

Except she wasn't there.

The purple cushion she'd been sitting on was empty. The entire chamber was empty. Nothing but chalky-white walls and the mirror-like surface of the pool.

Griffin glanced down into the water, just in case there was some lingering magical connection. But he only saw himself in the reflection.

He huffed out a frustrated sigh.

“Return the Golden Fleece?” he repeated.

“Yep!” Calix said, sounding almost cheerful for the first time. “Where do we start?”

That was the question, wasn’t it? Griffin remembered that the home of the Golden Fleece, the place where Jason found it, had been somewhere across the Black Sea. But where had Jason taken it to after? Where had it been kept all these many years since?

Before he could figure out where to look, they needed to do some research. And he didn’t know where better to begin than in the library at the Academy. If anyone had the inside scoop on the Golden Fleece—or might know how to find out—it was the school librarian, Mrs. Philipoulos.

And the best part was that he could autoport them there in an instant.

“Have you ever been to Serfopoula?” he asked Calix.

“Never!” The boy positively lit up. “I’ve always wanted to visit!”

As he reached out to take Calix’s hand for the journey, he couldn’t help but smile at the absolute joy on the boy’s face.

Griffin smiled. “Then today is your lucky day.”

He only hoped it was his lucky day, too.

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FIVE

The moment they walked through the entrance, Calix's jaw dropped. Griffin had to admit that the Academy's library was spectacular. All gleaming marble and glittering gold and seemingly endless stacks of books. Plus the not-so-secret archives of Olympic records and lost works that occupied an unknown number of underground levels.

To a bookworm like Calix, the whole place must have felt like reader paradise.

"This is amazing," Calix whispered as they walked past the tables and shelves on the first floor. "I've heard about it a million times, but it's way more beautiful than I ever imagined."

"Yeah," Griffin said, leading them to one of the curved staircases that descended to the main floor. "It's pretty awesome."

Calix reached out to touch everything. He trailed his fingertips over the worn wooden tables, the white marble railing, the gilded edges of the stacks. Griffin could practically hear the boy's heart beating faster at the sight of so many books.

"I've never been anywhere like this," Calix explained. He stopped suddenly. "Oh! Is that a first printing of Meditations? Marcus Aurelius is

my favorite philosopher."

He pulled the book from the shelf and quickly started flipping through the pages. A smile filled his entire face.

Griffin hated to crush the boy's enthusiasm, but they had work to do.

"Come on," he urged. "We need to get started on this quest. Who knows how long it'll take?"

Eyes glued to the book, Calix didn't seem to hear him. He scanned the pages like he was trying to memorize every single word.

"I'm sure Mrs. Philipoulos will let you come back anytime," Griffin said.

Calix looked as if Griffin had popped his favorite balloon. He closed the book with a sigh and reluctantly slid it back onto the shelf.

"My mom won't let me come," he said. "She never lets me go anywhere because she's scared something bad will happen to me."

That made Griffin smile. "Then it's a good thing we're going to get your immortality back. I'm sure that'll make her less overprotective."

Calix sighed again. "I guess so."

Griffin felt bad dragging the boy away from the philosophy shelves. But the books would be there tomorrow and the next day and the day after that. Today, only one thing mattered. He had to figure out how to find the Golden Fleece. And hopefully, Mrs. Philipoulos could help.

As they walked down to the main floor, Calix lagged behind. Instead of slowing down to wait for him, Griffin leapt down two steps at a time. When he reached the bottom, he quickly scanned the area, searching for the librarian.

She was nowhere in sight. The library was open, so he knew she had to be there. It might have been summer, but Mrs. P was always on duty. Maybe she was on one of the lower levels. Griffin walked up to the information

desk, to the buzzer that would call her back from wherever she was working. As he reached for the button, he heard a muttered curse coming from the computer lab.

Going to investigate, he found the librarian struggling to plug a wall-mounted TV into an outlet just out of her reach.

“Don’t make me neofacture a ladder,” she grumbled, stretching her arm as far as it could go.

Griffin hurried to her side. “Here, let me.”

She smiled at him as he took the cord from her and easily reached the plug.

“Always the hero, Griffin Blake,” she said with a wink.

He stiffened at the ironic compliment. He knew there was no such thing as a secret at the Academy—especially from the librarian with a photographic and encyclopedic memory—and it she might have only been making a mythological joke. Either way, it was uncomfortable to be labeled a hero when he felt anything but heroic.

Hopefully, that was about to change.

“Anytime, Mrs. P,” he replied with his most charming smile.

“You’re not usually one to lurk in the library,” she said. “Are you looking for a book?”

“Actually, I’m here because I need some help,” he confessed.

She lifted one skeptical eyebrow. “Of what sort?”

“Information.”

“My favorite kind of help to provide.” She beamed. “Follow me.”

She led the way out of the computer lab, and Griffin followed. Calix had finally made it downstairs and was studying a special collections display in

the open area between the two curving staircases. A sign hung above the central display case read LOST PLAYS OF ANCIENT ATHENS.

Griffin grinned. Calix must have been in heaven.

Following Mrs. Philipoulos to the information desk, Griffin leaned on the counter while she stepped up to the computer terminal.

“What do you need to know?” she asked.

“The Golden Fleece,” he explained. “I need to know where to find it.”

Her thin gray eyebrows shot upward. Then back down into a frown. She turned away from the computer and leaned across the counter. He had a feeling that a lecture was coming.

“Is that wise? No one who ever went looking for the Golden Fleece has returned….” She paused, seeming to search for the right words. She settled on, “Unscathed.”

Griffin wondered how much he should tell her. No one had said anything about keeping the quest a secret. And it wasn’t even his quest, technically. Still, it felt weird. Or unlucky. Like saying out loud that he was trying to get his parents back would somehow jinx the whole thing. Which was silly, because he’d never been particularly superstitious.

Besides, Mrs. P could help more if he gave her as much information as possible.

“I don’t have a choice,” he finally admitted. “It’s for a quest.”

The librarian studied him for several long moments. He didn’t know what she was looking for—ulterior motives… signs of weakness… signs of danger—but she eventually seemed to be satisfied with his answer. She nodded as she stepped away from the counter.

“I know just what you need. Wait here.”

Then, in a flash—not the autoporting kind, just the fast-like-a-falcon kind—she was gone. Back into the bowels of the library to find whatever resource she thought would help him.

Griffin didn't think she would be very long, so he was just going to lean on the counter and wait for her to return. Until he felt a tap on his shoulder.

He turned around, expecting it to be Calix. Instead, he found Phoebe standing there. Her hair was pulled up in a ponytail, and she wore a pair of running shorts and a bright pink T-shirt that read SMILE EVERY MILE. She must have just finished a workout.

He couldn't keep the grin off his face. "Hey, stranger."

It had only been a few days since he saw her, but he'd missed her. Ever since the day she literally ran into his life—had it already been a year?—her presence always made him feel better. More at ease.

Which was just one of the reasons he hated being apart.

She closed the distance between them and wrapped her arms around his neck. As she hugged him close, she whispered, "I missed you."

He closed his eyes and sank into the hug.

"How did you know I'd be here?" he asked.

He hadn't even known himself until a few minutes ago.

"I didn't." Phoebe leaned back. "But Nicole said I might want to visit the library after my run. She didn't say why."

"I'm glad she did." He grinned at her.

"Me too." Her smile softened. "How'd it go? With, you know…."

Only a handful of people at the Academy knew what he was trying to do. Headmaster Petrolas, of course, since he'd been the one to suggest it in the first place. Nicole, who had relayed that suggestion, and their friend Troy,

who’d been at the table when she did. He hadn’t asked Phoebe to keep it a secret from anyone else, but clearly she wasn’t shouting it from the rooftops. He was grateful for that.

She had to be curious about how things were going. There had been no time to send updates or pop home for a chat. He’d just autoported to Olympus and hadn’t been back since.

“Hera and I made a deal,” he said quietly. “If I help her—”

He glanced over Phoebe’s shoulder to check on Calix, just as the boy was reaching for one of the books in the drama display.

“I wouldn’t do that,” he called out before Calix could set off the alarms. “Mrs. P gets pretty touchy about anyone messing with her displays.”

Calix looked at Griffin and then, longingly, back at the book. He was probably debating whether the reward was worth the risk.

“She’s a descendant of Nemesis,” Phoebe added.

That seemed to make his decision for him. Calix sighed and turned away from the display. He slowly moved toward the counter, not-so-casually glancing at every book he passed along the way. If the boy ever wanted a job in the hematheos world, he would make a great librarian. Mrs. Philipoulos would sign him up for an internship in a heartbeat.

“This is my girlfriend, Phoebe.” Griffin wrapped his arm around her shoulder. “She’s Nike’s great-granddaughter.”

“Nice to meet you,” Calix said as he got distracted by a cart of books that looked ready to be re-shelved. “I’m Calix. Hera’s son.”

Phoebe blinked twice. “Her… son?”

She turned to stare at Griffin. She didn’t have to say the words for him to hear the unasked question: The baby you and Nic fed the ambrosia to?

When Griffin nodded, her entire expression softened. As she turned to look at Calix, he could practically feel her sympathy for the boy. He didn't need to use his psychospection to know some of that sympathy was probably directed at him, too.

He didn't want anyone's pity, not even Phoebe's. Especially not hers.

"I'm helping him on a quest," he said to redirect her attention.

"A quest?" Her jaw dropped. "Like a quest quest?"

"From the Oracle of Delphi," he explained. "She can give him his immortality back."

Phoebe nodded. "And if she does that, then Hera will unsmote your parents?"

"Exactly."

"Is it dangerous?" she asked. "The quest."

"I don't know yet. That's kind of why I'm here."

"Here we go," Mrs. Philipoulos called out, returning before Phoebe could ask any more questions.

The librarian cleared off a section of the counter and set a massive leather-bound book on the surface. An intricate gilded pattern was carved into the cover. Curling vines twisting around shapes of people and animals and mythological beasts. And they were all moving. Walking around the cover like some kind of animation.

With gentle hands, Mrs. Philipoulos lifted the cover and flipped to the table of contents.

Calix appeared at the counter.

"Is that a prehistoric record?" He angled in to get a closer look. "I've never seen one in person."

Mrs. Philipoulos beamed. “Precisely, young man.”

“What’s a prehistoric record?” Phoebe asked.

“The known history of mankind dates back only as far as the written record,” the librarian explained.

“But the gods predate everything,” Calix added. “They’ve been documenting the world since it came into existence.”

He reached out and traced a finger over the vine pattern that decorated the table of contents page. As his fingertip moved over a thorn, he yelped and yanked his hand away.

A drop of bright red blood dripped from the thorn.

Mrs. Philipoulos glared at Calix, who was sucking on his injured finger.

“If you don’t mind,” she chided. “The prehistoric records are not to be trifled with.”

She reached under the counter and pulled out a pair of work gloves. Once her hands were protected, she leaned forward over the book.

“Now let’s see….” She traced her fingers over the table of contents. “Where is the Golden Fleece?”

“Golden Fleece?” Phoebe whispered.

“That’s the quest,” Griffin said. “Returning it.”

“To Colchis?”

Griffin was impressed by her knowledge. “Yeah. But first we need to find it.”

“Golden Apple. Golden Daemons. Golden Dog.” Mrs. P jabbed her finger into the page. “Aha, there it is. Golden Fleece.”

They all watched eagerly as she flipped through the book, quickly finding the page where the story of the Golden Fleece began. The original tale. The one from which all the other stories and myths came.

“Let me just….” She turned a few more pages, until she reached the end of that entry. “Here we go.”

If he could read upside-down, Griffin would have leaned in to try. Instead, he waited for Mrs. P to tell him what it said.

“I’ll just cut through the wordiness,” she grumbled. “The gods never use two words when twenty will do.”

Calix made a weird noise. When Griffin glanced at him, it looked like he was trying to stifle a laugh.

“Ah, finally. It says here….” She reread a section at the very end. “The Fleece remains in the royal palace of Iolcus.”

“Where is that?” Phoebe asked.

Mrs. P looked up. “Near the modern city of Volos.”

“That’s great!” Griffin practically jumped onto the counter. “I can autoport us there.”

Calix coughed. “You can?”

“Yeah, I’ve been there,” Griffin explained with a grin. “On a field trip in Year 8.”

“Uh, well, actually…” the boy said. “You can’t.”

Griffin frowned at him. “Why not?”

“We can’t autoport anywhere. Or use your powers. Or modern transportation.” He made an apologetic expression. “The oracle said we could only use tools and methods that Jason himself could have used.”

Griffin’s excitement deflated right back down like a burst balloon.

“Sorry,” Calix sighed.

It wasn’t the boy’s fault. It wasn’t anyone’s fault. That was a hard thing about quests. They’re designed to be hard. More than hard. Impossible.

But Griffin was determined to achieve the impossible.

“Okay. Then we find another way to get there.” Griffin ran his fingers through his hair. “First, we need to get to the mainland.”

“I’m a terrible swimmer,” Calix said.

“You can’t take the Academy yacht.” Mrs. P closed the prehistoric record. “Modern transportation.”

Phoebe asked, “Know anyone with a sailboat?”

Griffin jerked up. “Actually, I do.”

“Really?” She sounded surprised.

“I’ll get seasick,” Calix blurted.

The boy looked a little green at just the thought of sailing.

“Sorry, bud, but this part is non-negotiable.” Griffin patted him on the back. “I’ll do whatever I can to make it easier on you.”

Just like he would do whatever he had to do to get his parents back. Even if it meant asking for a favor from the one person who was the least likely to do him one.

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SIX

Calix had never been on a sailboat before. But it didn’t show. He seemed to have overcome his worry about seasickness and was happily rushing around, helping Aaron get things loaded on board.

Aaron, on the other hand, seemed less than thrilled about the whole situation. He had done nothing but scowl and bark orders since they got to the dock.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Phoebe asked. “He seems really….”

“Angry?” Griffin suggested.

Phoebe winced. “Yeah.”

“It’ll be fine.” He hoped. “Besides, it’s not like I have any other options.”

Asking his ex-girlfriend’s older brother to ferry him across the Aegean wasn’t at the top of Griffin’s bucket list. Or on the list at all. Even though Griffin and Adara were still good friends, that didn’t seem to matter to Aaron.

He understood, though. If Griffin had a younger sister, he would be way overprotective of her, too.

He was just glad that Aaron's anger seemed to be reserved for Griffin. At least the guy wasn't taking it out on Phoebe.

"Blake!" Aaron shouted from the deck. "Get that trunk on board!"

Griffin shrugged at Phoebe and headed for the pile of supplies stacked at the end of the dock. He expected to lift the trunk easily. But when he tried to pick it up, he struggled to get it off the ground.

Phoebe swatted his hands away.

"You'll sprain your back," she said, grabbing one handle. "Let me help."

He smiled as they lifted the trunk together and began walking it up the ramp.

"There." Aaron pointed to the back of the boat. "Secure it against the aft rail."

Aft apparently meant rear.

They set the trunk in place. Then Griffin grabbed a coil of rope and started tying it down. When he had wrapped it twice, he tied the end into a double knot.

"Are you joking?" Aaron asked, appearing at Griffin's side. "Who taught you to tie a knot?"

Griffin pushed to his feet, brushing off the dust and the criticism. "No one."

"It shows."

Aaron knelt down and quickly untied Griffin's knot. It was mesmerizing to watch him retie the rope. His hands moved so quickly Griffin couldn't keep up with the motion. Clearly, he wasn't going to learn anything about knot tying today. Not from Aaron.

"This is the last bit," Calix called out.

He held up the backpacks that Griffin had filled with some essentials for their trip. A couple changes of clothes, basic toiletries and first aid gear, and a handful of protein bars. He didn't know what the road to Iolcus might bring or how long it would take. He wanted to be prepared.

"Stow those in the cabin," Aaron told the boy with none of the anger that he had boiling for Griffin.

Griffin knew asking Aaron had been a risk. It was a big favor, and Adara's brother had no reason to help out her ex. But he had counted on Aaron's honorable streak mattering more than holding a grudge.

He'd been right. But that didn't mean Aaron was going to let him off easy.

"The tide is going out," Aaron said. "We need to push off soon."

Griffin turned to Phoebe.

She smiled. "That's my cue."

"I'll walk you to the dock."

Griffin followed her down the ramp. When they reached the dock, she turned to face him, and he wrapped her in his arms.

"I don't want you to go," she said.

"Phoebe—"

"I know, I know." She shook her head. "I want you to go. I just don't want you to be gone."

He dropped his forehead against hers. "Same."

"I could come with," she suggested. "It could be fun."

"It could be dangerous," he countered. "Besides, Headmaster Petrolas would flip out."

She sighed into him.

They both knew he had to do this alone. Not just because Phoebe's stepdad would have an aneurysm if she took off for however long this was going to take. But because he needed to do this. He needed to do the work to make up for his mistake. He needed to earn his forgiveness.

"I'll miss you," she whispered against his lips.

He pressed his mouth briefly into hers. "I'll miss you more."

"Be careful," she said.

He wanted to say that he would be. He wanted to promise that he would be back soon and whole and unharmed. But he couldn't. That wasn't within his control. And he didn't make promises he couldn't keep.

Luckily, Phoebe seemed to understand that.

"If you need anything—" She dipped her head so she could look him in the eyes. "—you know where to find me."

He cracked a smile. "Running the Olympic training course."

"I think you mean breaking your record," she said with a smirk.

"Then I'll just have to break it again when I get back."

"If you two are done," Aaron shouted down from the boat, "I'd like to get underway before the tide goes out under us."

Griffin sighed and started to pull away.

"Oh, I almost forgot!" Phoebe dug into her pocket and pulled something out. "Here."

Griffin took the something from her outstretched hand. "Earplugs?"

She shrugged. "Nicole said you might need them."

“For what?”

Before Phoebe could answer, Aaron shouted for him to hurry up. He stuffed the earplugs in his own pocket, gave Phoebe one more kiss, then turned and jogged up the ramp. As soon as he was on deck, Aaron de-neofactured the ramp and headed to the captain’s chair.

Griffin leaned against the railing, watching Phoebe as the boat pulled away from the dock.

“I was super nervous at first,” Calix said, coming to stand next to Griffin at the rail. “But I think this is going to be really fun.”

The boy waved to Phoebe, leaning so far over the railing that Griffin grabbed the back of his shirt so he didn’t go overboard.

“Yeah,” Griffin agreed somewhat sarcastically. “Really fun.”

“Calix!” Aaron barked. “You want to run the mainsail up the mast?”

The boy whirled around and almost fell over. “Can I?!”

As he hurried off to help Aaron, Griffin watched first the dock, then Serfopoula itself, slowly fade into the distance. The island had just disappeared from sight when the boat rolled over a serious wave.

Griffin’s stomach rolled right along with it.

Yeah, really fun. If his seasickness stayed under control.

He’d been trying to stay confident for Calix, trying to convince the boy that seasickness wouldn’t be a problem. And, clearly, it wasn’t turning out to be one for Calix. But Griffin knew it would be… for him.

The boat hit another wave. Griffin grabbed his stomach. This wasn’t going to be good.

“Blake!” Aaron shouted. “Can you—”

Before he could finish, Griffin turned toward the rail, leaned over, and heaved his guts into the sea. Twice. Some hero he was. Couldn’t even take a boat ride without losing total control of his body.

He only hoped that the ride was as smooth and fast as possible. That this sailing was behind him as quickly as it could be. For all of their sakes.

But as they rolled over another wave, his stomach reminded him that yesterday wasn’t soon enough.

After almost two days on the water, Griffin’s seasickness wasn’t any better. If anything, it was worse.

If he were to guess, he’d say that Aaron had plotted the roughest possible path across the Aegean. He wasn’t just being paranoid, either. When Griffin had first turned away from the rail, feeling drained and empty and ready to heave again at a moment’s notice, Aaron had looked at him from the captain’s seat. And smiled.

He’d grinned in the face of Griffin’s misery.

In any other situation, Griffin might have confronted him about it. Explained that it wasn’t entirely his fault that he and Adara had broken up. That they’d broken up tons of times before the last breakup finally stuck. That she was just as happy to have it over as he was.

But in his current state, Griffin could only lurch his way across the deck and collapse against the cabin wall.

Deep breaths. Take deep, calming—

“Still haven’t got your sea legs, Blake?” Aaron teased.

Griffin couldn’t even muster the energy to respond with a rude gesture. It was all he could do to pry one eye open and pretend to glare.

“Here,” Calix said, squatting down next to Griffin. “Drink this.”

He took the bottle the boy offered. “What is it?”

“Water,” Calix replied.

The thought of putting anything to his stomach sent it rolling again. But Griffin knew that dehydration would only make everything worse.

“Thanks.” He took a long drink.

“Aaron says we’re making good time,” Calix said. “He thinks we’ll be in Volos in a few hours.”

Griffin closed his eyes and nodded. He could last a few more hours. He hoped.

Instead of churning in his stomach, the water felt good. It felt relaxing. Griffin leaned his head back against the wall and closed his eyes. Maybe the seasickness was finally passing. Maybe, after a little more rest, he’d feel able to help out on deck. Maybe….

He must have drifted off to sleep, because the next thing he knew, Calix was shaking him awake.

“What’s wrong?” Griffin asked.

“Nothing’s wrong,” Calix replied. “We’re here.”

Griffin was instantly wide awake. “In Volos?”

Calix’s smile told him everything he needed to know.

“Calix! Make sure all the fenders are at dock level.”

“Yes, Captain!” Calix leapt to his feet and rushed off to help.

Griffin was glad to see the boy was learning what all that sailing jargon meant. And clearly enjoying himself. That made one of them.

But even as he pushed up to his feet, Griffin felt a little better. His stomach must have settled somewhat during his nap.

He wasn't one-hundred percent. He felt maybe fifty percent, max. But he could work with fifty percent. He'd pushed through in way worse percentages than that on the racecourse.

He staggered his way carefully across the deck to the steering wheel.

Aaron looked completely at ease and in his element. He'd always taken after the Poseidon side of the family more than Adara, who favored their Aphrodite heritage. With his face to the wind and his eyes on the water, he looked like something out of a pirate movie.

"What can I do?" Griffin asked.

Aaron's pale eyes speared him with a surprised look. "You're on your feet?"

Griffin shrugged. "I want to help."

Aaron studied him for a moment and then nodded.

"You can grab the bow mooring line." He nodded toward the front of the boat. "Get ready to hitch it to the docking cleat."

"Do what to the what?"

Aaron smirked as he returned his attention to the water. "When we get close enough to jump to shore, take the blue rope and tie it securely to the big metal thing on the dock."

Blue rope. Big metal thing. He could do that.

Griffin took the assignment seriously, focusing so intently on his task that he didn't even notice the seasickness anymore. He narrowed all of his attention on being ready to—what had Aaron called it? Hitch the mooring

line to the docking cleat? The last thing Griffin wanted was the give the guy another reason to hate him. When Aaron wasn't being unnecessarily overprotective of his sister, he was actually pretty great.

The closer they sailed to Volos, the more tense Aaron got. Navigating the busy waters around the small port city was like running an obstacle course.

Griffin was glad all he had to do was follow orders.

After a harrowing few minutes where it seemed like a freighter was going to run right over them—Aaron managed to maneuver them out of danger without the bigger ship ever even realizing they were there—the sailboat coasted perfectly into place at the end of a small marina.

As soon as he could safely make the leap, Griffin jumped off and tied the blue rope to the big metal thing. He wrapped it a couple of extra times, just to make sure.

At the other end of the boat, Calix was doing the same thing.

Aaron came over to the rail to check their work.

"Great sailing, man," Griffin said.

Without thinking, he held up his hand to give Aaron a high five. When Aaron turned to look at him, he almost pulled his hand back.

But then the guy smiled and lifted his own hand to meet Griffin's.

Except instead of just slapping palms and dropping back, Aaron wrapped his fingers around Griffin's hand and didn't let go.

"Look, I know it's not all on you," Aaron said, his voice low and serious. "But Adara's having a hard time, and I just…."

Griffin waited—not ashamed to say he held his breath—while Aaron found the words.

"It's easier to take it out on you than Apollo."

Griffin was relieved when Aaron released his hand. When he'd attended the Academy, Aaron had been the captain of the wrestling team. The guy was still all muscle. He could toss Griffin into the Aegean with very little effort.

"I get it," Griffin replied. "I want the best for her, too."

It was just that, after years of on-and-off dating, he'd finally realized that the best for her wasn't him. He wanted her to feel the kind of magic he felt with Phoebe. She deserved that and more.

The two guys shared a moment of silent agreement.

"That was amazing!" Calix shouted, running up from the back of the boat. "I thought we were goners for sure."

Aaron turned his attention to Calix, and Griffin headed for the cabin to retrieve their backpacks. He didn't think this was the end of his tension with Aaron, but maybe they were back on the path to friendship. Aaron Spencer was a guy he would rather have as a friend than an enemy.

When he returned, Aaron and Calix were standing on the dock.

He held out one backpack over the rail to Calix. "This one's yours."

The boy nodded and slipped his arms through the straps.

"You sure you know what you're doing?" Aaron asked as Griffin stepped off the boat. "If you want more help…."

"Nah." Griffin waved him off. He didn't want to push his luck. "We've got it under control."

Aaron nodded. "Well, if that changes…." He jerked his head toward the captain's desk, where the boat's communications equipment was set up. "I'm just a radio call away."

"Thanks, man," Griffin said. "I appreciate it."

But he knew they wouldn’t be asking for help. And not just because they didn’t have access to a marine radio—or even cell phones—because that would violate the terms of the quest. He didn’t want to threaten their tentative truce by begging another favor.

As Griffin and Calix headed into the bustling port of Volos, he only hoped that what he’d told Aaron was true. That they knew what they were doing. Because if history and mythology were his teachers, on a quest, that wouldn’t stay true for long.

Volos looked like any of the countless ports on the Aegean. Pastel-colored buildings with tile roofs. Cypress trees and flowering bushes. Narrow streets crammed with cars and empty, uneven sidewalks.

From what Griffin could gather on the map he picked up at a tourist kiosk in the marina, they’d made it almost halfway across town. Iolcus was waiting for them on the other side of Volos.

“What is that?” Calix rushed up to a window that boasted the best marides tiganites in town. “Is it any good?”

The boy had stopped at practically every business they passed. Hardware stores, clothing shops, bakeries. Since Hera had never let him step foot off Mt. Olympus until now, this was all shiny and new.

Griffin eyed the window display. He didn’t doubt that the platter of fried whitebait fish was the best in town. It certainly looked tasty. That didn’t mean he wanted to stop for lunch.

“It’s not my favorite,” he replied, giving Calix a nudge to keep moving.

Up ahead, a grocery store had stacked crates and boxes of produce along the sidewalk. A rainbow array of fruits and vegetables tempted passersby to

stop and shop. An older gentleman carefully swept the sidewalk around the display.

While Calix visually devoured the exotic food, Griffin smiled at the shop owner. Couldn't hurt to get some advice.

"Αυτός είναι ο δρόμος προς την Ιωλκό?" he asked. Is this the path to Iolcus?

The old man squinted at him and replied in broken English. "Why you go there?"

"To see an old friend," Griffin answered. A very old, very dead friend.

The man raised both bushy eyebrows and shrugged. "Yes." He gestured down the road they were walking. "That way. Three kilometers."

Griffin nodded in thanks.

"This looks delicious!" Calix picked up an apricot and held it to his nose. "It smells like honey."

The old man set his broom against the building and then reached under the stool by the door. He pulled out an ugly red fruit and held it out to Calix, gesturing that he should smell that one.

Calix took the fruit and drew in a big sniff.

Griffin and the old man both burst out laughing as Calix thrust the fruit away from him.

"That is disgusting!"

The old man laughed and took back the fruit. Griffin reached for a display of figs and picked out the two largest.

"We'll take these," he said.

He dug for his wallet, but the man waved him off.

“Take,” he said. “You need. For journey.”

Griffin nodded. “Thank you.”

Calix was still wiping at his nose, trying to dislodge the smell, as they walked away.

“Break this open.” Griffin handed one fig to the boy. “It will clear out your nostrils.”

“I’ve never seen so many different things. I mean, my mom has all the best stuff brought to the palace. But stuff like this?” He held up the fruit. “It’s even better.”

As Griffin bit into his fig, he wondered what Calix’s life had been like. For a kid who’d only ever had the best things in life, he was really grounded.

Another few blocks down the road, Griffin braced himself for a major detour. Calix hadn’t yet noticed the sign that read Βιβλία Αρχαιοτήτων. ANTIQUARIAN BOOKS.

“Oh. My. Goddess.” Calix exclaimed. “Is that—?”

He looked eagerly from Griffin to the bookstore and back again.

“Can we?” he asked.

“I wish we could, but—”

“Please!” Calix looked at him like a starving puppy. “Please, please, please.”

As they reached the sidewalk in front of the store, Griffin really wanted to keep on walking. It was already mid-afternoon. If they didn’t make good time, it would be dark by the time they reached Iolcus, and they would have to wait until morning to find the palace.

But the desperate excitement in Calix’s eyes was too much for him to resist.

“Okay,” he relented, “but just for a min—”

Calix was inside with the door clanging shut behind him before Griffin could finish.

“—ute,” he said to himself.

Then he followed the boy inside.

Calix was already making his way along the shelves that lined the shop, overflowing with volumes that spilled out into stacks that covered the floor. A literal labyrinth of books. Griffin made his way to the counter, where the shop owner, a relatively young woman with jet black hair and bright green eyes, watched Calix carefully.

She was probably imagining the chaos a tween boy could cause in her shop. Not that it wasn’t already chaos, but he had a feeling she could identify every title in every stack.

“He’s obsessed with books,” Griffin said, wanting to reassure her. “He’ll be respectful.”

She raised a skeptical eyebrow.

“That’s not all he is,” she said. “And neither are you.”

She scanned her gaze over Griffin as he shifted uncomfortably.

“A descendant of Ares,” she said, squinting at him. “Or perhaps Hermes.”

“Ares,” Griffin said with a smile. “You’re good.”

“I am.” She beamed proudly, then turned her attention back to Calix. “But him? He’s an enigma. I can’t quite….” She gasped. “Impossible. He couldn’t be. Could he?”

“Oh-oh-oh!” Calix grabbed a book from a shelf and quickly flipped it open. “Homer’s First Drafts.”

The shop owner turned to Griffin and whispered, “Hera’s mortal son?”

Griffin nodded, confirming her guess. He held out his hand. “I’m Griffin Blake.”

Her eyes widened just enough to let him know she knew exactly who he was—and what he’d done. He shouldn’t be surprised. The entire hematheos world knew.

“Danae Laphraios, descended from Apollo,” she said as she shook his hand. “I can only imagine that you come this way on the trail of a quest.”

“Right again. We’re looking for Jason’s palace.”

“In Iolcus?” She nodded. “I know it well.”

This was the best news he’d heard since they’d stepped off the boat. Griffin wanted to dance for joy. But he was afraid he’d knock over a stack of books in the process, which might make her less inclined to help.

“Can you tell us how to find it?” he asked.

Danae looked at him, as if deciding whether to get involved. He hoped there wasn’t anything keeping her from doing so. The disagreements between the gods didn’t always translate into the same between their descendants. Even if they did, though, Griffin hadn’t heard of any current fights between Ares and Apollo.

“No,” she said. “I cannot tell you.”

He felt his shoulders sag. Thanks for nothing. Maybe there was something going on between the gods of war and music, after all. Griffin really needed to pay more attention to the news coming out of Olympus.

Time to collect Calix, who had moved on to another section of shelves, and get back on the road.

“But,” Danae said with a smile, “I can show you.”

Griffin was stunned. “What? Really?”

“Just give me a minute to close up the shop,” she said, “and I will guide you to the palace.”

“Thank you,” Griffin said—and didn’t think he’d ever meant the words more in his life. It felt like a huge worry had been lifted off his shoulders.

Danae moved from behind the counter and headed for the back room. As she passed by Calix, she said, “Take any book you like. My compliments.”

Griffin had never seen eyes get as wide and excited as Calix’s did just then. The boy clutched a well-worn copy of Aetia to his chest.

Honestly, Griffin felt just as excited to have Danae’s help to find the palace. If all went well, before nightfall, they would have the Golden Fleece and be on the next leg of the quest.

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SEVEN

From the outside, the palace didn’t look like anything special. Not much different from any other ancient Greek structure. Wide steps leading up to a columned facade with a pediment that depicted a bearded man surrounded by fluffy sheep. It could have been the entrance to any number of crumbling temples throughout the region.

The major difference was the fact that it wasn’t crumbling. It was pristine, as if it had been built recently. The off-white marble gleamed like it had been carved and polished only yesterday.

It was so shiny that it looked like it would feel wet to the touch. Not that Griffin was close enough to touch it. Not that he could even get close enough to touch it. They were standing outside the entrance gate—down the excruciatingly long driveway from the palace. The wrought iron gate was flanked by a plaster-covered wall that seemed to encircle the entire property.

To anyone driving past, this probably looked like just another country estate. Except for the pair of beefy guards that stopped anyone and everyone at the gate. Everyone. Even members of the hematheos world.

Since Griffin, Calix, and Danae had arrived over twenty minutes ago, the guards had stood there like statues, silent and unmoving.

If not for the small Olympic tridyma symbol decorating the epaulets of their gold and tan uniforms, Griffin might have mistaken them for ordinary nothos security guards. But no, these were fellow hematheos. Likely from Palaistra's line, if Griffin had to guess. The goddess of wrestling would be proud of her hulking descendants.

He walked up to the one on the right again.

"We need to get inside," Griffin said for the fifth—or fifteenth—time. Maybe this time he would get lucky. "We have important business with the palace."

The guards didn't budge. They didn't look at him or at each other. They didn't even blink. The barely-perceptible flare of their nostrils was the only sign they were even breathing.

"It's for a quest," he explained, hoping to convey the urgency of the situation. "A quest from the Oracle of Delphi."

That got the attention of the guard on the left. He looked at Griffin, his brown eyes slightly wide, as if suddenly curious about the situation. The other guard, however, remained a stony monolith.

The guard on the left tried to reason with his partner. "Maybe we should—"

"No, Stavros."

And with that, Stavros slammed his jaw shut and didn't say another word.

"This is ridiculous," Danae muttered. Then, to the guards, "I've been a guest of the palace on countless occasions. I'm sure that Letha will want to see me."

"Letha was very explicit," the guard on the right said. "No guests."

The guard on the left returned to staring blankly ahead.

"You haven't even asked her," Danae said. "How can you know if you don't ask?"

That didn’t seem to have even the slightest impact on either guard. Danae crossed her arms over her chest and let out a frustrated huff. Then, as if deciding to test the strength of their conviction, she started for the gate. She didn’t make it two steps before both guards moved to the center and blocked her path by crossing their spears. She threw up her hands and stormed back to where Griffin stood.

Calix didn’t seem bothered by the situation. He’d found himself a shady spot on the wall and was eagerly devouring his new book. As if he weren’t in the middle of a quest to restore his immortality. As if there weren’t literal life or death stakes.

Well, even if Calix didn’t feel any sense of urgency, Griffin did.

He walked a little closer to the guards—not enough to get the crossed-spears treatment, but close enough to lower his voice. He felt weird about broadcasting this everywhere. But he had to do whatever it took to complete this quest.

“Look, guys,” he said, his voice quiet enough so that it didn’t carry, “that kid is Hera’s son.”

He sensed both guards turn to look at Calix. Since the story of Hera’s mortal son was clearly widespread in the hematheos world, he knew they knew exactly who the boy was.

“I’m helping him with his quest to get his immortality back,” Griffin explained. “I’m sure the goddess queen would look very favorably on anyone who helps us.”

Stavros shifted, and his expression softened. His partner remained a stony-faced statue.

Griffin brought out the big guns. “And I’m sure she would look unfavorably on anyone who stands in our way.”

That one hit home. The guard on the right shifted and let out a big sigh. The guard on the left turned to face him.

“I’m sure Letha will understand, Rocco,” Stavros insisted.

Rocco clenched and unclenched his jaw several times. He was cracking, but he hadn’t broken yet. Griffin had a feeling that Stavros knew exactly how to finish the job.

“You remember what happened when we didn’t let Hermes in?” the other guard asked.

Rocco’s eyes bulged. He swallowed hard and nodded. Finally, he said, “Yeah, okay.”

Griffin wanted to shout for joy, but he maintained his composure. He didn’t want to give the stony guard any reason to unchange his mind.

“You can go in,” Rocco instructed. “But you have to tell Letha that you climbed over the wall. I’m not getting fired for this.”

“Thank you,” Griffin said, patting the gruff guard on the shoulder. “I’m sure Hera will be grateful for your help.”

Stavros gave him a thumbs up. Then both guards returned to their serious, on-duty positions.

“Yo, Calix,” Griffin called out. “Let’s go.”

Calix looked up from his book. “They’re letting us in?”

“Hurry up,” Griffin said. He didn’t want to waste any more time. And he didn’t want to give Rocco a chance to rethink who, between Hera and Letha, he was more afraid of crossing.

Calix slid his book into his backpack as he walked over.

“This is where I leave you,” Danae said. “You will need to win Letha over on the merits of your quest.”

Griffin nodded. “Thanks for guiding us here.”

Danae smiled and then autoported away.

“Remember,” Rocco said as the gate slid open behind him. “We didn’t let you in.”

Griffin nodded before starting up the driveway. Adrenaline pumped through his veins—and not just because of the quest. They were about to enter the ancient palace of the Jason. The onetime home of a legendary hero.

It might not have been an actual temple. But to someone who looked up to the ancient heroes like deities in their own rights — especially Jason—it was like entering sacred ground. Griffin couldn’t wait to see what the inside looked like.

Griffin had always imagined a hero’s home would be kind of austere. Spartan. Like they were too busy off being heroes to bother with decorating.

Not so with Jason’s palace.

There was gold everywhere. The floor, the walls, and the columns were all some golden shade of marble. The capitals and the moldings were all gilded in what looked like real gold leaf. If Griffin didn’t know better, he would think this place had once belonged to King Midas instead of Jason.

It gleamed so much it almost hurt Griffin’s eyes to look at.

“Whoa,” Calix said as they moved further into the entrance hall. “And I thought Mt. Olympus was ostentatious.”

A door at the far end of the entrance hall opened. A woman dressed in a white suit emerged, talking on her phone. That had to be Letha.

“No, I don’t care what he says. He is not getting another chance to—” The woman stopped mid-sentence when she saw the pair standing in her hallway. She blinked three times and said into the phone, “I’m going to have to call you back.”

She hung up and started down the hall. Her heels clicked on the marble, echoing off the walls. By the time she reached Griffin, the hall sounded like a thunderstorm.

“Who are you?” she demanded. “How did you get in here?”

“You must be Letha,” Griffin said, dodging the second question. “I’m Griffin Blake.”

He held out his hand, but the woman in white just frowned at it and then at him. “You are not welcome here.”

“We’re on a quest,” he said. “An important one.”

Letha scanned her gaze over Griffin and Calix. “What kind of quest?”

“The Golden Fleece,” Griffin explained. “We need to, um….” He swallowed hard. “Borrow it.”

That sounded better than take it, right?

“You can’t just come in here and borrow the Fleece,” she said. “This is not a library. You cannot check out objects at will.”

“We need to return it to Colchis,” he explained.

She shook her head sharply. “Out of the question.”

“Look,” Griffin said, “this is really important.”

The way her eyes narrowed at him, he knew she would be the judge of what was important or not. He had to convince her.

“The Oracle’s assignment is that he—” Griffin pointed at Calix, who was busy studying a mural that depicted Jason holding the golden ram high above his head. “—return the Fleece to the field it was taken from.”

“It’s not possible.”

“Look, this is Calix Aigophagos,” Griffin said, pulling out the secret weapon that had gotten them past the guards. “Son of Hera. Mortal son of Hera. On a quest to—”

“I don’t care if he is Zeus himself. He’s not coming in.” She narrowed her eyes and stepped closer. “Did those two idiots at the gate let you in here? I’ll have their jobs for this.”

“No, no,” Griffin said, stumbling over the lie. “We, um—”

“Jason has not taken uninvited visitors in more than five hundred years,” she stated. “And I’m not about to let a hematheos scavenger—” She gave Griffin an unimpressed look before flashing a glance at Calix. “—and a powerless god-child be the first.”

“Wait, what?” Griffin jerked back a step.

“I’m sure you’re a very nice hero-groupie,” Letha said. “But I’ve seen it all before. It’s my job to keep the likes of you away from him.”

“Away from him?” Griffin echoed. “Away from… Jason?”

Now it was her turn to look confused. “Who else?”

Calix moved away from the mural. “Like, Jason Jason? Like the Jason?”

“Yes, the Jason.” Letha threw her hands up in the air. “Is there another?”

“Thousands, actually,” Calix replied.

“Are you telling me,” Griffin said before Letha could argue with the boy about his comment, “that the Jason of legend is… still alive?”

Danae hadn’t mentioned that. No one had mentioned that.

His response took Letha back a step. She re-crossed her arms over her chest and studied him.

“You didn’t know that?”

Griffin coughed out a laugh. “Nobody knows that.”

“Oh, people know,” she said with narrowed eyes. “My family has been fending them off for centuries. They want to rub his beard for luck or pluck a fiber from the Golden Fleece or kill him for their own glory.”

“That’s awful,” Calix said.

Griffin shook his head. He wasn’t sure what shocked him more. That there were people like that in the world, who wanted a piece of the hero for themselves. Or that Jason was still alive.

Who was he kidding? The latter. Definitely the latter. The hero he had looked up to his entire life was still alive. It wasn’t possible. Was it?

“I don’t believe you,” Griffin whispered.

“You really didn’t know.” Letha sounded slightly more impressed. “Then that means—”

“We’re really here on a quest,” he finished for her.

Letha raised an eyebrow. “What makes you think that a descendant of… what? Ares?” she correctly guessed. “Can follow in the footsteps of Jason of legend?”

“Because,” Calix said before Griffin could stop him—or answer for himself, “he’s not just a descendant of Ares. He’s the only living descendant of Hercules.”

That stunned her silent for a good seven seconds.

This was just one of the reasons he didn't like to tell people that part of his ancestry. He didn't want them to act like that made him something special. Like that made him heroic by birth. Hercules—like Jason and the other heroes—had earned his title through his choices and actions.

What had Griffin ever done to even be associated with that honor?

"Well, I am impressed," Letha finally said. "But my job remains the same. No one gets in to see—"

"Let them in."

They all jumped and turned to face the source of the deep booming voice that echoed down the hallway. A tall man with a dark bushy beard stood in an open doorway. He wore a tattered robe over striped pajamas and navy blue slippers that had seen much better days.

"Let them in, Letha," he repeated. "Any descendant of Herc is as good as my brother. They are welcome here."

Then Jason—Jason!—turned and walked back into his room.

After Letha scowled at the retreating hero, she shrugged and gestured for them to go ahead and follow him. Griffin practically sprinted the length of the hall. His mind still couldn't quite wrap itself around the idea that the hero he'd revered for so long was not only still alive and living in his old palace, but that Griffin was about to meet him.

There were so many questions he wanted to ask. How was this possible? Why didn't more people know? What was it like to be a literal, actual, living, breathing hero?

Of course, Griffin's own heroic ancestor had been turned into a demigod, which meant he was still alive. But to be honest, Herc was… kind of a jerk. The few times Griffin had actually met him, the guy spent most of the time showing off his archery skills. Not exactly hero-worship-inspiring.

But as Griffin walked through the door into what had to be Jason's den, he couldn't overcome his awe at meeting his personal hero.

Calix followed in right on his heels, clearly as excited as Griffin to meet the legend.

"Have a seat." Jason gestured at a leather couch that sat under a mural depicting a massive sea battle. There were ships and sea monsters, men and sirens, arrows and canon-fire.

Parts of the room looked like a typical man cave. Dark brown lounge furniture. A pool table in one corner. A massive television filling one entire wall, tuned to a 24-hour sports channel that was currently showing a wrestling match.

The room itself was otherwise straight out of mythology. An intricate mosaic decorated the floor. Fresco murals covered every wall—including the one behind the TV. The architectural details were as gilded in here as they had been in the hall.

And on the far side of the room, on what appeared to be an outside wall, hung the Golden Fleece. Covering a window.

The legendary Golden Fleece was being used as a makeshift curtain.

"Why are you here?" Jason asked as he lowered into a well-worn recliner that faced the couch. And the TV screen above it.

He leaned back and flipped up the footrest, sighing as he sank into the comfort.

"We're on a quest," Griffin began.

"Heard that part." Jason held up a hand to stop him. "What kind of quest? Who gave it to you?"

"To him, actually." Griffin nodded at Calix, who sat perched on the arm of the couch. "The Oracle of Delphi."

Jason let out a low whistle.

“What do you have to do?” the hero asked.

“We need that.” Griffin pointed to the Golden Fleece. “We have to return it to where it came from. To where you found it.”

For a long time, Jason stared at Griffin. Like he was trying to read Griffin’s thoughts. Which Jason couldn’t do, because he wasn’t a hematheos. Being immortal didn’t automatically come with dynamotheos powers. Griffin didn’t know how the hero was still alive, but if he had been granted demigod status—and all the powers that came along with it—the entire mythological world would have heard.

Just as Griffin was about to start shifting uncomfortably under Jason’s scrutiny, the hero transferred his attention to the Golden Fleece.

The room suddenly felt very empty. As if Griffin and Calix weren’t there anymore. It was only Jason and the Fleece.

Which, if Griffin actually thought about it, was all it had ever been. Jason and the Fleece. That was the story that had been told over the centuries. Over the millennia.

But Jason had to be more than that. No one person was defined by a single story. By a single event. Surely the hero had accomplished more in his extended lifetime than just fetching the Fleece.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Jason turned back to look at them. He met Griffin’s gaze straight on and said, “No.”

Griffin blinked several times. He couldn’t have heard right.

“No?”

Jason shook his head.

“That thing only causes pain.” He gestured over his shoulder toward the Fleece-covered window. “Do you know why I keep it in here, hung up

where I have to look at it every single day?”

Griffin and Calix both shook their heads.

“As a reminder.” The hero pushed deeper into the recliner. “So I never forget how stupid I was.”

If Griffin hadn’t been sitting down, he probably would have collapsed.

Next to him, Calix gasped. “You aren’t stupid! You were never stupid!”

Jason shrugged, as if the opinion of this little blond boy didn’t matter to him.

“You’re… you’re… Jason!” Calix blurted. “You’re a legend.”

Jason waved him off.

“You sailed across the Black Sea, fought countless monsters to bring the Fleece back to your uncle,” Griffin recounted, “and reclaimed the throne that he had stolen.”

“At what cost?” Jason bellowed. “The cost of my father’s life? Half of my crew’s? My love, Medea’s? Who, that had any connection to me, was not cursed by death or suffering?”

Griffin wasn’t sure how to respond to that. Jason wasn’t wrong. There was a lot of death and suffering surrounding the quest for the Golden Fleece. There was a lot of death and suffering surrounding all the ancient quests. But that didn’t mean you gave into it. Griffin could have drowned himself in shame and sadness after his parents were smoted. But he hadn’t. He knew that carrying on, that living his life to the fullest, was the best way—the only way—to repay them.

Jason had retreated from the world instead.

How could this man, a hero idolized throughout history for his bravery and rewarded by the gods with immortality, be such a… coward?

“This isn’t how to honor those losses,” Griffin said.

Jason smirked. “You know nothing of loss.”

“I know more than you think.” Griffin shook his head. “You’ve spent all these years, all these centuries, hiding in this palace, moping? What a waste.”

Jason shrugged, as if Griffin’s opinion didn’t matter to him.

Griffin felt frozen in shock. And disappointment. To think he had spent his entire life looking up to this hero. Had admired his courage and determination to do what was right, to avenge and right wrongs. And all this time… he was just as flawed and fallible as everyone else. As Griffin himself.

He should have known better than to worship any hero.

“You know, I’ve always looked up to you.” Griffin clenched his hands at his sides. “Out of all the heroes, you were my favorite.”

The ex-hero’s attention didn’t waver from the wrestling match.

“A hero doesn’t hide from his mistakes. Herc isn’t perfect, but at least he atoned for what he did and moved on. You’re still trapped by your past.” He gestured at the dark, gloomy room around them. “You’re wasting your immortality.”

He forced his palms open and pressed them flat against his jeans.

“But I’m not going to waste this chance to get Calix’s back.”

And he wasn’t going to ask, either. Doing the right thing was all the permission he needed.

Griffin started toward the window. Before he got halfway across the room, Jason was on his feet, blocking the path. Griffin’s body tensed as he met and held Jason’s fierce stare. He didn’t know if he could take on an immortal hero, but he was willing to try. He had to try.

Luckily, in the end, he didn’t have to.

“Fine,” Jason said, stepping out of Griffin’s way as if they hadn’t been on the brink of battle. “Take it. Maybe it will bring you more luck than it ever gave me.”

Griffin’s body relaxed as he released a sigh of relief. They were less than a day into the quest, and already he felt like he’d been on an emotional roller coaster.

It bothered him a little that Jason seemed so disconnected—from the world, from his legacy, from the continuation of the quest he began so long ago. But at least the hero had backed down. At least Griffin could still respect him. Even if, maybe, he didn’t look up to him quite as much.

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EIGHT

Griffin felt weird getting the Golden Fleece down off the wall. Like, who was he to be doing that? Then again, that wasn't any weirder than the fact that an object of such ridiculous mythological value was spending its days as a makeshift curtain.

When he thought about it that way, Griffin felt almost like he was rescuing the Fleece from its embarrassing fate.

"A little to the left," Calix said, guiding Griffin closer to the window.

Griffin wrapped his arms tighter around Calix's legs and moved them closer. They had quickly learned that, apparently, mythological superhero hermits don't keep ladders around their ancient palaces.

"Almost there…" Calix leaned forward.

Griffin braced himself to keep them both from tumbling through the window.

"Got it!"

Calix cheered, and the Golden Fleece floated to the ground. The room suddenly flooded with sunlight, glinting brightly off the golden objects that

were strewn all about.

From the looks of things, Jason didn't let anyone in there to clean up. The room definitely could use a housekeeper. It probably drove Letha crazy.

While Calix rolled the Fleece up into a more manageable bundle—it was much bigger than it had seemed hanging up—Griffin set to work combining the contents of their two backpacks into one.

"How's this?" Calix asked.

Griffin looked up and inspected the bundle. "Great." He held out the now-empty pack. "Let's see if it will fit."

The entire time they struggled to get the Fleece down and into the pack, Jason sat in his chair watching the match. Or at least he appeared to be watching the match. He was facing the TV. But Griffin got the feeling that the hero was acutely aware of everything they were doing.

Aware, but not interested in helping.

With a little extra squeezing, they got the Fleece shoved into the pack and the zipper closed. It was safe and ready for travel.

Calix sat back on his heels. "Now what?"

"Now we need to get to Colchis," Griffin said. "On the far side of the Black Sea."

"How are we going to get there?" Calix asked.

Yep. That was the question.

Griffin leaned against the wall beneath the window and sighed. He'd been so focused on the first part of the journey—getting to Iolcus and finding the Fleece—that he hadn't given much thought to the next stage.

The Aegean was a tiny pond compared to the Black Sea. It was hundreds of stormy, treacherous, and mythologically booby-trapped miles across. And

since they could only use methods of transportation that were available when Jason made the original journey, their options were limited. Seriously limited.

Walking was out of the question. It would take weeks. They didn't have nearly enough supplies for that kind of trek, and Griffin had a feeling that Headmaster Petrolas would consider being on a quest an unexcused absence once school started back up in September.

Horses were an option. That wouldn't cut the travel time down by much, but the journey would be less strenuous. Griffin hadn't ridden in years, though, and never for longer than an afternoon.

"Can you ride?" he asked Calix.

"Ride what?" The boy's eyes widened. "A horse?"

When Griffin nodded, Calix cringed.

So, horses were out.

That left only one choice. One that he wasn't exactly thrilled to make.

"We need to sail there," he said. There was a sour taste in his mouth, a sharp reminder of how he had fared on the first journey by sea. He swallowed hard and pushed it aside. "We need a boat."

Calix winced. "Are you going to call Aaron?"

The guy had offered to help. Although he probably didn't expect them to take him up on the offer so quickly. But to reach out to Aaron, they would need to use a marine radio. Which would use modern technology and therefore be against the rules of the quest.

He supposed they could go down to the docks and find a boat heading toward Colchis. Surely, if they volunteered to help out on board, someone would give them a lift. As much as he didn't love the idea, hitching a ride seemed like the best—and only—option.

“You could take the Argo.”

Griffin’s head whipped around to face Jason.

The hero hadn’t moved a muscle. His eyes were still trained on the television, but he had clearly been paying close attention to what was happening in the room around him.

“I’m sorry, what?” Griffin asked, not sure he’d heard the man correctly. “The Argo?”

Calix jumped to his feet. “As in the Argo?”

“The ship you sailed—to Colchis and back—in…?” Griffin wasn’t sure exactly when the original quest had occurred, and he didn’t want to insult the ancient hero by guessing. “It still exists?”

Jason scratched behind his ear and nodded.

“And is it…?” Griffin didn’t know how to ask this delicately. “Still seaworthy?”

Jason turned slowly away from the match and stared at Griffin for so long that he started to shift uncomfortably.

“Yeah,” the hero finally said. “She’s seaworthy.”

Then he turned back to the TV.

To say Griffin was stunned would be an understatement. And thrilled. And, um, did he say stunned? Not only was the Argo still around and still in shape for a voyage, but clearly, Jason wasn’t as indifferent to the quest as he wanted to appear.

Griffin looked at Calix, who was staring at him with wide eyes. Griffin shrugged. Then Calix shrugged. Then they both shrugged.

Griffin finally pushed to his feet.

“Um, yes, then,” he said to Jason. “We’d love to, um, take the Argo.”

He couldn’t believe those words had actually come out of his mouth. Then again, he couldn’t believe he was saying them to the one and only Jason.

Without another word, the hero grabbed the remote off the side table, turned off the TV as he stood, and then walked to the door.

Griffin lifted the two backpacks, decided that the one holding the Fleece was lighter, and handed that one to Calix. He pulled the supplies-filled pack onto his back and followed Jason out the door.

“Letha!” Jason called out, his voice echoing down the hallway.

His personal gatekeeper appeared from another doorway.

She wiped at her mouth—as if she’d been caught eating—and smiled. “Yes?”

“Call Vasos. Tell him to get the Argo out of dry dock.”

“The Argo?” she echoed. “Out of dry dock?”

“And tell him to hurry.” Jason glanced back over his shoulder. “We have a quest to complete.”

Letha nodded and hurried off to make the phone call.

“We?” Griffin asked.

Had he heard right?

Jason laughed. “You don’t think I’m going to let you take her out on your own, do you?”

“Um, well…” Griffin didn’t know what he’d thought. He’d only been concerned about finding a boat. Figuring out how to sail it was going to be his next problem. That was the only way he knew how to get through this quest. One problem at a time.

But if the hero was up for the trip, that was one less problem Griffin had to solve.

Can't keep a good hero from a quest, Herc always said.

For once, the big lunkhead was right.

"Besides," Jason said, still laughing, "it's not as if I have anything better to do."

Jason followed Letha into the other room, leaving Griffin and Calix standing alone in the hall. Everything had happened so quickly, Griffin wasn't sure he could really grasp it all.

To go from awe to disappointment to hope to fanboy delight in the space of a few minutes was disorienting.

"Did he—?" Calix asked.

Griffin nodded.

"And then—?"

Griffin sighed. "Yep."

"And we—?" Calix made a vague gesture that somehow encompassed the two of them, Jason, and the Argo.

"Apparently," Griffin replied.

Even though Calix couldn't put it into words, everything fell into place in Griffin's mind. If anyone had asked him a year ago—or even an hour ago—if this scenario was possible, let alone probable, he would have laughed them out of the room. But now, with a straight face and a happy heart, he said what Calix couldn't.

"We're going to be sailing the Argo across the Black Sea," he said, "with the hero Jason at the helm, to return the Golden Fleece to its rightful home."

Not even the certainty of seasickness could keep the grin off his face.

Griffin stood on the dock, staring up at the Argo. And up and up. The mast reached high into the sky.

It was a very tall ship.

Next to him, Jason was all smiles. Any remaining traces of reluctance had disappeared as soon as they saw the ship. The hero's face practically cracked with the joy of seeing his old friend.

Maybe all Jason needed was a little nudge out the door to remember what being a hero felt like.

Calix, on the other hand, looked like he'd eaten some bad calamari. Griffin felt pretty much the same. Not just because of the seasickness he knew was coming his way. That was going to be worse by a factor of ten compared to what he'd felt on Aaron's relatively tiny boat, for sure.

No, he was nauseous because the ship was so freaking big. The deck had to be at least the size of a soccer pitch. He couldn't wrap his head around how they were going to sail it, just the three of them. Especially not when Griffin and Calix knew practically nothing about sailing.

"It's really big," Calix said. "Like, really big."

Jason nodded proudly. "One of the biggest in her day."

"How are we—?" Griffin couldn't manage to get the question out. "We can't even…."

Jason patted him on the back—so hard that Griffin stumbled forward a step.

“Not to worry, young one,” the hero said. “That’s what the crew is for.”

“The crew?” Griffin echoed.

Surely he didn’t mean that the original Argonauts were still alive. That was impossible. Even more impossible than finding out Jason himself was still alive. A hero like Jason being granted immortality, and it remaining a secret, was one thing. But to have so many ancient immortals walking around the modern world would definitely raise more than a few questions.

Jason turned away from the ship. “Ah, here they come.”

Griffin spun around at the sound of a car pulling up behind them in the marina parking lot. A gleaming black SUV slid into the nearest spot. At once, all four doors opened, and people started climbing out.

It was like something out of an action movie montage. The men and women were all tall, tan, muscular, and dressed like they were ready to either climb a mountain or overthrow a small country. Cargo or hiking pants paired with some kind of performance shirt—tank, tee, or stretchy button-up—seemed to be the uniform of the day.

By the time the SUV doors slammed shut, nine people had emerged. Four women, each within an inch or two of six feet, and five men, who far surpassed that height. Most had their hair slicked back into either a ponytail or a braid. All wore mirrored sunglasses. No one passing any of them—let alone all of them—on the street would doubt their power.

The driver popped the hatch and started handing out tactical backpacks that made Griffin’s school bags look like a joke.

As the group made their way toward the dock, Calix whispered, “Who are they?”

They looked like a team of professional rugby players. Or an elite military strike force.

“They aren’t the original Argonauts?” Griffin asked, swallowing hard. “Are they?”

Jason laughed, as if that was the most ridiculous thing he’d ever heard. As if his own very existence wasn’t just as ridiculous, and yet totally real.

“No, of course not.” Jason rested his hands on his hips, surveying the group as they crossed the parking lot. “These are their descendants.”

That explained a lot. Anyone who got one look at this group could sense their powerful heritage.

Records were sketchy as to the actual identities of the original Argonauts. Almost every hematheos family claimed at least one member in their ancestral tree. Some reports counted their numbers as high as fifty. And judging by the size of the Argo, Griffin wouldn’t be surprised if that number was accurate. Heck, even Hercules was rumored to have been part of the crew. Not that there was any actual evidence of that.

But if anyone knew who the descendants of the actual Argonauts were, it would be Jason.

However many of them had made the original sailing, the repeat journey would have to make do with a much smaller crew. The group assembled in a semi-circle before them. Nine descendants of the original Argonauts. Plus Griffin, Calix, and Jason. Which brought the total number to twelve.

Olympus always did like an even dozen.

“We got your message, Jason,” one woman said. “We are prepared to undertake the voyage of our ancient ancestors.”

“Excellent!” Jason clapped his hands and rubbed them together. “Let’s get her ready to sail.”

He turned and walked up the ramp to the deck of the Argo. The nine new arrivals—the modern Argonauts—climbed up behind him.

A shiver ran down Griffin’s spine. He wasn’t sure whether it was excitement or nerves. Either way, he was eager to get going on this journey. Because the sooner they started, the sooner it was over. And the sooner he got his parents back.

He gestured for Calix to lead the way up the ramp, and Griffin started up behind him.

Watching a crew of sailors who clearly knew what the heck they were doing was a thing of beauty. Sailing seemed to be a hereditary trait for the Argonauts. Which kind of dispelled the idea that Herc was one of them, since he clearly hadn’t passed any of that same seaworthiness down the line to Griffin.

He helped as best he could.

The Argo had been in storage for centuries, so they worked long into the night to get her ready to sail. When he started to literally fall asleep while coiling a rope, Jason gently shook him on the shoulder and told him to get some rest. Griffin had said the same to Calix a few hours earlier. He was too tired to even protest.

Stumbling to the crew quarters, Griffin practically collapsed into a bunk. After spending a week sleeping fitfully in a visitor’s room on Mt. Olympus, followed by the exhausting journeys to Delphi and Iolcus, he didn’t even care if the bedding was as old as the Fleece. He was asleep the instant his head hit the pillow.

The next morning, Letha was back with a breakfast feast and a delivery of food and other supplies they would need for the journey. Once those were loaded on, one of the women raised the mainsail and, with a fortuitous wind, they were on their way.

For the first several hours of the journey, the seas were calm. The boat moved so smoothly over the water that Griffin didn't feel more than a hint of seasickness. He was starting to think that maybe he wouldn't have to spend the entire way heaving his guts into the Black Sea.

That all changed as the sun started to dip below the western horizon. The sky turned nasty. Full of dark storm clouds and angry winds. By the time the sun disappeared, the water had become choppy.

The Argo hit one particularly big wave that sent Griffin lurching toward the rail. And then sent his stomach lurching over the edge. He knew he shouldn't have eaten that souvlaki earlier. He shouldn't have eaten anything.

Once his stomach was empty, he sat down on the deck and pressed back against the rail with his hands over his eyes, trying to get the nausea under control.

"I threw up, too."

Griffin pried one eye open to peer through his fingers. Jason stood next to him, staring out over the water.

"Just now?" Griffin asked.

Jason chuckled. "No. The first time. I retched the entire passage."

"That's not part of the legend."

"Yeah, well…" The hero shrugged. "I might have asked the scribes to omit that bit. Didn't want to tarnish my heroic reputation."

That made Griffin smile. If one of the greatest heroes in all of mythology had been seasick during his legendary quest, then he didn't feel so bad to be doing the same thing. He was in good company.

"How did you get over it?"

“Saltwater and time cure many ills,” Jason said. “By morning, the worst will be behind you.”

“Thanks,” Griffin said. “I hope you’re right.”

Jason didn’t reply. He just stared off across the sea. It was obvious how much he loved the water. Maybe that water in particular. Griffin had a feeling that drawing Jason back out into the world was a really good thing. He was proud to be part of that.

As Jason continued to watch the horizon, the old hero didn’t so much as wobble. Clearly, he still had his sea legs. No matter how much the boat pitched and rolled, he stood as steady as a statue. But watching Jason take the waves with ease wasn’t doing Griffin’s stomach any good. He was just about to put his hands back over his eyes when the boat lurched over a massive wave. It came back down with a deafening crack.

That sounded bad.

Then someone shouted.

Griffin jumped to his feet. He struggled to keep his balance as he and Jason listened.

“Watch out!” someone yelled. “Cetus ahoy!”

Cetus? That sounded really bad.

Jason sprinted in the direction of the shout—toward the front of the ship. Without another thought for his seasickness, Griffin sprinted after him.

By the time Griffin reached the front of the ship, Jason was already giving orders.

“Tighten up the sails,” he shouted to one of the new Argonauts. “We need to make a hard left.”

The new Argonaut ran off.

“What’s happening?” Griffin asked. “What’s a cetus?”

Jason rushed past him, heading for the bow lookout. He climbed up onto the post and started directing the two new Argonauts operating the steering oars.

“It’s a sea monster,” Calix whispered as he pointed out in front of the ship.

At first, Griffin couldn’t see anything. All waves and mist and clouds. It all looked the same. Then, as the sea suddenly dipped low before them, he saw it.

It looked like something out of a medieval manuscript. Or a horror movie. Multiple inky-purple tentacles, each the size of a dinosaur, waved menacingly in the air. He couldn’t get an idea of exactly how big the thing was, but it covered a wide area of the water.

A wide area that was directly in the Argo’s path.

Griffin’s heart thudded.

“Not just any cetus,” Jason shouted. “A scylla. It’s been dormant for two thousand years.”

“Why did it wake up?” Griffin asked, but he had a feeling he already knew the answer.

“It came for the Argo.”

As the ship lurched hard to the left, one of the Argonauts gripped the rail next to Griffin to keep from flying across the deck.

“The tale of this monster was passed down through our families over generations,” she said. “A clever beast that always got its prey. Until the

Argo outsmarted it.”

“It’s been waiting for her to return to the sea ever since.” Jason jumped down from the lookout, clearly more energized by the challenge than afraid of it. “To exact revenge.”

The ship made another move, sending the deck into such a steep pitch that Griffin had to hold the rail with both hands. Then, suddenly, it was like everything went into slow motion. Instead of sailing away from the scylla, the Argo started drifting toward the monster.

“What happened?” Jason shouted. “It’s as if we lost power.”

“Maybe it’s that?” Calix pointed toward the center of the ship.

Everyone who had gathered on the bow turned to look and gasped. The main mast leaned to the right—to the starboard—at an alarming angle. And the sail itself had slid along the crossbar, essentially closing down their primary propulsion system. No wonder the ship felt like it was just floating along.

The only thing holding the mast onto the ship were the ropes attaching the base of the sail to the deck. And those appeared to be on the verge of giving out under the strain.

“The stays!” One of the new Argonauts pointed to the top of the mast, where one very thick rope fluttered in the wind. “The port stay has snapped.”

“Find a replacement,” Jason barked, but the Argonaut was already digging through a chest of ropes Griffin had coiled the night before. “Who can get up the mast?”

“I’m a rock climber.” Another Argonaut stepped forward. “I can do it.”

“You’re too heavy,” another said. “The mast is barely holding on.”

Jason looked at Calix. “Can you climb?”

Calix's eyes widened. But he nodded. "I can try."

The boy could barely hike a mountain trail. He wasn't capable of this.

"I can do it." Griffin stepped forward. He wasn't as light as Calix, but compared to the beefy Argonauts, he was a featherweight.

Jason nodded.

The Argonaut searching the chest had found the replacement stay and handed one coiled half of it to Griffin.

"It's plenty long," she said. "We'll hold the end down here, and once you've secured the mast, we'll pull it upright."

Griffin nodded and slung the coil of rope over his shoulder. Then, as quickly as he could scramble, he started up the mast. Because Jason didn't have control of the ship, it was bobbing around the Black Sea like a child's toy, swinging back and forth at the mercy of the waves. And the monster.

His stomach was having none of it, but Griffin pushed on. He could puke his guts out later. For now, he had a ship, a crew, and Calix to save.

He'd never climbed to such a height in his life. It was like the tallest ladder in the world. Plus, he was being thrown around, nearly falling more than once. Each and every rung was a full-body workout. Reach, reach, step, step, pull. All while carrying a heavy rope and fighting against gravity. His muscles were going to be sore the next day. If he survived.

He glanced back over his shoulder, down at the deck, only once. Everyone far below was struggling to control something—an oar, a rope, a sail. Everyone… except Calix. The boy stared up at Griffin.

Griffin felt a tightness in his chest. A twinge of responsibility. He had to succeed. There was no other option. He turned back to the climb.

Sheer determination kept him going, kept him tightly hugged to the mast.

When he finally reached the peak, he carefully untied the remains of the original stay and secured the new rope with a close approximation of the knot. He hoped Aaron would be proud. Or, at least, not embarrassed.

Who was he kidding? He only hoped it held.

“Okay!” he shouted down and gave the waiting Argonauts a thumbs up.

They got to work instantly. Griffin wrapped his arms around the mast while the crew pulled it back into place, inch by excruciating inch. As he held on for dear life, waiting for the mast to be secured, Griffin realized he had never felt so alive. Had never felt so… proud. He didn’t think he wanted to take up questing as a hobby—or a profession—but there was something energizing about facing and overcoming seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

Now he understood why Herc spent so much time reliving his past adventures.

Almost as soon as the mast was re-secured, Calix dragged the sail back open and Jason regained control of the boat. In a matter of heartbeats, the hero had steered them out of the scylla’s path. The Argo was back to smooth sailing.

Griffin quickly made his way back down to the deck. A much easier feat than the way up. As soon as his feet touched wood, Calix tackled him in a hug.

“That was so brave,” he said against Griffin’s chest.

Griffin patted the boy on the back. “I just did what needed to be done.”

Uncomfortable with the praise, Griffin focused his attention on the sea monster they were now swiftly sailing past. A group of the Argonauts stood at the starboard rail with a large bundle. One of them counted down from three. Then they tossed the bundle out over the water.

A massive net floated open, almost magically guiding itself to the scylla. As the net came down, the monster's tentacles struggled against the restraint. If Griffin had to guess, he would say the net had been enchanted by a certain water-loving Olympian.

He watched with relief as, seconds later, the beast started to sink into the depths.

But his relief didn't last long. As the scylla's final tentacle dipped below the surface, it seemed to take the water down with it. What began as a dip in the sea continued to grow. Within moments, the area the monster had taken up was replaced by a massive whirlpool.

"Um, Jason?" Griffin croaked.

The hero shouted back, "I am aware!"

Jason was at the starboard steering oar, trying desperately to guide them out of the whirlpool's path. He pulled the ship into a sharp turn as it tilted into the steep edge of the growing vortex. The deck was suddenly almost perpendicular to the water.

Calix wasn't prepared for the shift. He flailed for something to grab onto, but everything was out of reach.

Griffin watched, helpless, as Calix flew across the deck. He was heading straight for the open sea. At the last second, the boy caught the rail on the far side of the ship. But he was hanging out over the whirlpool and barely holding on.

Then Calix's hold slipped.

Griffin reacted on instinct, launching himself after Calix.

He landed with a crash against the rail. When he looked over the edge, he saw Calix dangling from an oar, clutching the blade for dear life.

"Hold on!" Griffin shouted.

Calix screamed as he struggled to keep his grip.

Griffin grabbed a coil of rope that had slid across the deck. After quickly tying one end to the rail and wrapping the other around his forearm, he jumped over the side. With one arm tethered to the boat, Griffin swung himself toward Calix. He crashed into him with an oof. Securing his free arm around the boy's skinny body, he yanked Calix close.

"I've got you," he said reassuringly.

The boy sobbed, "Don't let go."

"I won't," Griffin promised. "I won't."

The ship's angle changed, and they swung back closer to the Argo's body. Griffin turned so that he took the brunt of the collision. His only thought was holding on.

Moments later, Griffin felt a tug on his arm. When he looked up, he saw some of the Argonauts pulling the rope. Slowly, heave by heave, they drew Griffin and Calix back up onto the ship.

By the time they were back safely on deck, Jason had guided them past the whirlpool, and the waters seemed to have calmed.

As Griffin hugged Calix's shaking body, he could only hope that the worst of the quest was behind them. But, knowing quests, that was just an appetizer. The real meal would come when they landed in Colchis. If they landed in Colchis.

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NINE

For the next few days, the journey was relatively uneventful. No new sea monsters showed up to take revenge against the Argo. No more whirlpools opened up to sink her to the bottom of the sea. It was as if they'd earned a break.

Even Griffin's seasickness seemed to have gotten better. Not that it was entirely gone. Whenever the ship hit a decent size wave, his stomach still turned. But it didn't last as long, and it was becoming easier to control his reaction. Jason had been right.

If the rest of their sail across the Black Sea was as smooth as the last couple of days, Griffin would rest easy.

Calix didn't seem as relieved. Ever since Griffin had saved him from going overboard, the boy had been different. Less full of joy and enthusiasm. More thoughtful and introspective. Griffin had to assume that nearly dying was having an effect. The boy was probably in shock.

All the more reason they needed to complete this quest and restore Calix's immortality as soon as possible.

When Griffin emerged from below deck on their fifth morning on board, he saw the boy standing at the bow of the ship. Calix was gazing out across the

sea, but it didn’t seem like he was seeing anything. Just staring blankly.

They hadn’t really talked about what happened—about what almost happened. Maybe they needed to.

Griffin crossed the deck to join him at the rail.

“Morning,” he said.

Calix didn’t respond. He didn’t even seem to notice that Griffin was there.

“Hey.” Griffin placed a hand on Calix’s shoulder. “You okay?”

Calix turned to look at Griffin, clearly surprised to find he wasn’t alone.

“Oh, hey,” the boy replied.

There was a sadness in Calix’s eyes that hadn’t been there before. They definitely needed to talk about what happened. Griffin just wasn’t sure how to start.

The person who would know best how to approach something like this was Phoebe’s stepdad. The Academy’s headmaster always seemed to know what to say and when and how to say it. Since Griffin couldn’t exactly give the guy a call, he tried instead to adopt the man’s persona. What would Headmaster Petrolas say?

“It’s totally normal to be freaked out,” Griffin began. “I mean, almost dying is a huge shock, no matter who you are.”

“What?” Calix’s brows drew together. “Oh, right. That.”

The boy kind of shrug-nodded.

When he didn’t say any else, Griffin continued. “Maybe you’re not ready to talk about it yet. But when you are—” He wrapped his hands around the rail and stared straight ahead. “—I’m here.”

“I appreciate that,” Calix said. “Really. But that’s not….”

Griffin waited for him to continue, assuming that the boy was struggling to find the words to talk about his feelings. But when he didn't seem to be making any progress, Griffin turned to face him.

Instead of looking like he was struggling to talk about his emotions, Calix appeared to be struggling to climb over the rail.

"Calix, dude!" Griffin grabbed him by the shoulders and fought to keep him from going over. "What in Hades are you doing?"

"It's so beautiful…." Calix had a blissful smile on his face. "Can't you hear it?"

"Can't I hear—" Griffin was about to ask, What? But then he heard it. The faint, barely perceptible voice of a woman singing.

His heart rate sped up. He knew exactly what that was. And it wasn't good.

Keeping hold of Calix with one hand—which was a struggle as the boy tried harder and harder to get free—Griffin dug into his pocket with the other, looking for the earplugs that Phoebe had given him.

As he got them out of his pocket, Calix shoved hard against his grip. The earplugs got knocked several feet away.

Griffin dragged Calix with him, finally pulling them within reach. He carefully opened the box and stuffed first one, then the other, deep into his ears.

When he could no longer hear anything but his own breathing, he got to work.

Calix trying to go overboard would only be the beginning. But he had to secure the boy first. Dragging him toward the center of the boat, Griffin held him in place and tied him to the mast. It was becoming increasingly clear to Griffin exactly why there were so many extra coils of rope lying around.

"Stop fighting it," Griffin told the boy. "You're only going to hurt yourself."

But Calix didn’t stop. He kept struggling against the rope.

It was useless. The boy wouldn’t stop trying to get loose until they were out of hearing range. And until he got the captain secured, they would only sail closer and closer to the siren.

Griffin didn’t have an extra set of earplugs. He only had the first pair because of Phoebe—because of Nicole and however she knew he would need them. He had to find something else to use on Jason.

As he sprinted to find the hero, Griffin scanned the boat for anything that could stop the sound.

He finally spotted it. A pile of discarded rags. He grabbed a handful and sprinted toward the steering oars. As he reached them, he saw he was already too late. Jason had that same dreamy look on his face as Calix.

But Griffin wasn’t about to give up.

He rushed up to the captain—who was steering them directly into the siren’s path—and wrapped the rags around his head, making sure there were extra layers over the ears. He tied the ends tightly together so they wouldn’t come loose.

Then he stepped back and waited.

When Jason’s eyes cleared, the hero blinked several times and then looked at Griffin.

“What’s going on?” the hero asked, reaching up to untie the rags.

“Don’t!” Griffin shouted, grabbing Jason’s hands. He mouthed, “It’s a siren!”

Jason’s eyes widened. He nodded and lowered his hands.

“Which way?” the hero mouthed back.

Griffin pointed in the direction that Calix had tried to climb overboard. The captain quickly steered the ship the opposite way. While Jason guided them to safety, Griffin went to find the new Argonauts. It had taken him so long to get Calix and Jason secured he was afraid that one or more of them had gone overboard.

Instead, he found that the female Argonauts had tied up their male counterparts and were standing guard to make sure they didn't escape. He gave them a thumbs up and went back to watch over Calix.

It felt like an eternity before they got beyond the reach of the siren's song. But when the boy finally stopped struggling, Griffin knew they were in the clear. Calix looked at him and, when the boy realized what had happened, burst into tears.

Griffin held him as he sobbed. Getting Calix's immortality restored couldn't come fast enough.

As the ship continued her way through the Black Sea, he left the earplugs in place. Just in case. You could never be too careful on a mythological quest.

Luckily, Griffin didn't need to stay vigilant against sirens—or any other creatures in the Black Sea—for very much longer. Half a day after the incident with the siren, Jason steered the Argo into port in a coastal village of what used to be the Colchian kingdom.

As soon as the ramp was set out, Griffin rushed down onto the mainland, with Calix right on his heels. He had the urge to kneel down and kiss the ground.

He hoped he never had to sail again in his life.

After recovering himself, Griffin turned around to go back and start unloading. Instead, he saw Jason walking down the ramp carrying the two backpacks. The rest of the Argonauts remained on board. They were busy securing ropes, rehanging sails, and basically resetting the ship after the dangerous sail across the sea.

“You’ll be wanting these.” Jason held out the packs.

Griffin took them both, then handed the one with the Fleece to Calix.

“You’re not coming?” the boy asked.

Jason smiled sadly and shook his head. “I’ve done what I set out to do. My part in this quest goes no further.”

“What about them?” Griffin asked, nodding up at the deck.

Again, Jason shook his head.

“That’s the hard truth about quests,” the hero explained. “While you may have help along the way, in the end, it is yours alone to complete.”

Griffin understood. It had been enough of a commitment for Jason to loan them the Argo, let alone sail them across the Black Sea. It would be greedy to expect more. That didn’t mean Griffin wasn’t selfish enough to want to ask. But he held back. This hero deserved to have his wishes respected.

“Thank you for bringing us this far.” Griffin held out a hand.

When Jason reached out to shake it, Griffin felt the rough texture of the old hero’s palm. He might have been made immortal, but old scars still made their marks.

“Before you go,” Jason said, “if I might offer a bit of guidance?”

Calix smiled and nodded enthusiastically.

Griffin said, “Please do.”

“The path you seek begins at the fountain of the golden ram,” Jason said, his eyes getting a faraway look. As if he was lost in the past, remembering the original quest.

Calix opened his mouth to ask more, but Griffin placed a palm on the boy’s chest. They needed to give Jason time to process.

When the hero had, he added, “Seek out the old man in the market.” He pointed toward shore, in the direction of the little village where they had docked. “He can show you where to begin.”

Jason turned and started back up the ramp.

“How will we find him?” Calix asked. “How will we know which man?”

The hero paused and looked back over his shoulder.

“Oh, you will know,” he said with a cryptic smile. “I have no doubt.”

With that, Jason climbed back aboard the Argo. As he stepped onto the deck, he shouted out orders to the Argonauts. They quickly pulled up the ramp and, moments later, were back underway.

Griffin wondered what would happen to the Argo on the westward voyage? Would it be smooth sailing? Or just as eventful as their eastern crossing? Would he, one day, hear the tale of the Argo’s return? Or maybe even be the one to tell that tale?

It was a fanciful thought. But he didn’t have time to waste pondering the future. They had a quest to complete in the present, starting with finding the old man in the market.

Griffin helped Calix secure his pack, then swung his own into place as they started toward the small village. It only took a few minutes to find the market in the center of town. The vendors must have come from the surrounding lands because there were dozens of stalls. More stalls than it seemed like there were residents in the village. It would take them some

time to search the market. Griffin was just about to suggest they split up to search faster when he felt someone tap him on the shoulder.

He startled and turned around to find a small, wrinkled old man smiling at them.

“The fountain, you seek?” he asked, his voice as cracked as his face.

Griffin didn’t know how the man knew. But Jason had been right about this, too.

“Yes,” Griffin replied. “We’re looking for the fountain of the golden ram.”

The old man nodded and waved for them to follow him. He led them through the market and out the other side. Into the alley behind the market, where they found a donkey hooked up to a cart. There was a small seat built into the front of the cart. The back was filled with hay.

The old man pointed at the back of the cart.

“There. Sit,” he instructed. “I drive.”

He pulled himself up into the seat—with surprising agility for someone so aged. Griffin walked around to the back and tossed his pack up into the hay.

“Do you think this is safe?” Calix asked.

Griffin climbed in after his pack. “I’m sure it’s fine.”

Calix didn’t seem reassured, but he bounded up into the cart anyway. They had just settled their packs between their legs and leaned back against the outer walls when the cart lurched into motion.

“How far is it?” Griffin called up to the man.

He made a vague hand gesture. “Two hour. Maybe more.”

Two hours. Okay, they had time to breathe. Griffin sank deeper into the hay. He was too wired to sleep, but he could close his eyes for a bit and relax. It

couldn’t hurt to restore his energy before he faced whatever was waiting for them at the fountain. Some deep breathing and meditation would do wonders for his energy levels.

Griffin jolted back awake after what felt like only moments—although the position of the sun in the sky indicated it had been much longer.

“Here,” the man said.

Griffin sat up and looked around. Apparently, he hadn’t been too wired to sleep after all.

They appeared to have arrived in the central plaza of another town. This one even smaller than the port village. And just across the square, rising at least twenty feet into the sky and framed against the backdrop of a tree-covered mountain, was a beautiful fountain. With a golden ram sculpture perched on top.

Griffin and Calix scrambled out of the cart and pulled their packs back on.

“Here start,” the man said. “There go.”

Their guide pointed to a path that seemed to lead into the forest and up the mountain. Griffin had a feeling it wouldn’t be an easy trek.

“Thank you,” he said to the man. “How can we thank you? We have some food and a little money.”

The man waved them off. “I do for Jason.”

“Are you sure?” Calix asked. “You brought us such a long way and—”

The man waved them off again, and then, in the blink of an eye, he, his donkey, and his cart vanished.

Griffin stared for several seconds at the empty space where the man had been.

“Well, that was…” he couldn’t find the words.

“Dolos,” Calix said. “I’d bet my life on it.”

Of course! The gods loved to meddle with anyone undertaking a quest, humans and hematheos alike. The god of trickery—who, in his true form, was a charming young guy, not some weathered old man—loved it more than most.

“Do you want to eat something before we climb?” Griffin asked.

Calix shook his head. “I’d rather get it over with.”

Griffin nodded. He couldn’t agree more. Then, without another word, they started up the path.

Griffin didn’t know how long they’d been climbing. An hour? Two hours? More?

The mountain hadn’t seemed that tall from the bottom, but the more they climbed, the more they seemed to have left. The sun was high in the sky now, which meant they were also sweating. Griffin made sure they each drank enough water. They didn’t need the get set back by dehydration or heat stroke. Not this close to the finish line.

He was trying really hard not to think about what they might have to face once they reached the top. Guessing was impossible. Instead, he focused on putting one foot in front of the other.

“Are we there yet?” Calix asked.

Griffin lifted his gaze from the trail and looked ahead.

“Nope,” he replied. “We’re getting close.”

“You said that last time.”

And it was just as untrue this time.

“Seriously, who knew that quests involved so much climbing?” Calix complained. “They leave that part out of all the stories.”

The boy wasn’t wrong. Between climbing to the oracle’s cave and now to the top of this mountain, they were becoming expert hikers.

To be honest, Griffin was actually enjoying himself. Hiking combined some of the things he loved most about long-distance running: spending time in nature and working up a sweat. Maybe he and Phoebe should make hiking part of their training. It could only improve their stamina.

“What’s that?” Calix asked.

Griffin dragged himself out of his thoughts and looked at the path ahead. The trail forked, and a signpost showed what lay ahead in each direction. To the left—if the pictogram was any indication—lay the way to the top of the mountain with a scenic overlook. The actual text was in Georgian, and Griffin couldn’t make any sense out of it.

The other sign, though, was in ancient Greek.

Το ιερό άλσος του Άρη.

The sacred grove of Ares.

“We made it.” Griffin’s heart beat faster. “The field is this way.”

His palms began to sweat as they turned to the right. He was nervous about what they would find in the grove. But he was even more excited to be so much closer to fulfilling the quest, restoring Calix’s immortality, and getting his parents unsmoted.

All of his exhaustion floated away.

“I’m sorry, you know,” Calix said.

The apology seemed to come out of nowhere.

“For what?” Griffin replied. “You have nothing to apologize for.”

“For all of this,” Calix said. “If not for me, you wouldn’t be here doing this. You wouldn’t have almost died on the Argo.”

“Twice,” Griffin teased, but Calix didn’t think it was funny.

The boy shuffled along beside him, head hanging low.

“Hey, I’m the one who should apologize,” Griffin told him. “If not for me, we wouldn’t need to go on this quest in the first place. None of this is your fault.”

“Yeah, actually, it—”

“Whoa!”

Griffin’s jaw dropped as the path emerged out of the dense forest into what looked more like a carefully cultivated orchard. Dozens of bushy fruit trees grew in perfectly aligned rows in an otherwise empty field. One row of trees bore bright red apples, the next one golden yellow. There were pomegranates, pears, figs, peaches, and more. All were perfectly ripe, all at the same time.

Griffin didn’t have to be a botanist to know that nature didn’t behave like that without some kind of mythological intervention.

This was definitely the place.

“Whoa is an understatement,” Calix said. “This must be the sacred grove, right?”

Griffin nodded. “Without a doubt.”

They walked to the end of the path, right up to the edge of the grassy field. There was a definite separation between the forested world of the trail and

the manicured world of the orchard. Griffin could almost feel the magical protection that surrounded the field.

The gods didn't like people—hematheos or otherwise—getting into their stuff. So they often installed mystical protection around their spaces to keep people out.

Even without the sign back at the fork in the path, Griffin would have known this sacred space belonged to Ares. Maybe it was Griffin's connection to his mythological ancestor, but he could feel the god of war all over this orchard. A faint undercurrent of anger.

They stood at the edge of the grove and stared out over the field.

"What do we do now?" Calix asked.

Griffin pointed to a very tall, very golden tree that stood at the far end of the orchard. "I'm guessing we have to hang the Fleece in that tree."

"Right, but…" Calix made a vague gesture at the grove. "It can't be that easy."

Griffin knew the boy was right. In mythology, nothing was ever as straightforward as walking across a field. When Jason took the Fleece, he'd had to fight a dozen immortal warriors to get at it.

"What about the dragon?" Calix asked. "They killed it. Right?"

Oh yeah, and a dragon.

Griffin shook his head. He wished he knew. Right about now, it would have been useful if Jason had stuck around. As it stood, he only had the legends to go by. And if the legends were true, then, yes, the dragon was dead.

"I'm sure they did," Griffin replied, although he wasn't sure.

All too often, the legends were… embellished.

There was no way of knowing until they actually tried. The question was: how to start? Griffin considered several options before deciding to go with the one that seemed the least risky. The safest first step.

He shrugged out of his backpack. He didn't want to be carrying any more weight than necessary.

"What are you doing?" Calix asked.

"I'm going to go in."

"What?!" Calix looked at him with fear in his eyes. "No. You can't just… go in."

"You keep hold of the Fleece," Griffin replied. "I don't want to risk something happening to it. I just want to test the waters."

"Haven't you had enough waters lately?"

Griffin laughed. He knew Calix wasn't trying to be funny—the boy was scared and, honestly, so was Griffin—but it lifted his mood.

"I'll be quick," Griffin promised. "In and back."

He wanted to see what they were up against. Because he knew it wouldn't be as simple as walking over to the golden tree and hanging up the Fleece. And since there didn't seem to be any guardians or gatekeepers around to ask, there was only one way to find out.

Calix stood at the very edge of the field, the backpack with the Fleece behind him on one side and the backpack with their nearly-gone supplies on the other.

As Griffin faced the field, his heart went into overdrive. It was natural, he told himself, to be nervous about facing whatever mythological security system Ares had in place. Only an idiot would be calm and confident at this point.

He drew in a deep breath, lifted his right foot, and took a step forward.

Nothing happened. He didn’t know what he’d expected. A trio of angry giants appearing out of nowhere or a sudden volcanic eruption or a swarm of murder hornets. Day turning into night and the undead rising from their graves, maybe, if Ares was feeling particularly playful.

But nothing happened. Literally nothing.

He smiled and took another step. And another.

Maybe it would be that easy. Just this once.

“See,” he said over his shoulder to Calix, “there’s nothing to worry about. The waters are totally—”

Everything happened in a flash. The ground trembled. Calix screamed. And an entire mythological army emerged from the earth. Dozens of monsters and immortal soldiers formed an impenetrable web across the grove. The granddaddy of them all was a massive serpent the size of a freight train that shot out of the soil halfway between Griffin and the golden tree.

The dragon wasn’t dead.

“Run!” Calix shouted. “Run!!!”

Griffin didn’t need to be told twice. He spun on his heel and raced toward the safety of the forest’s edge. He could feel the hot breath of the colchian dragon on his neck as he leapt the final distance. Though he preferred long-distance running, after the Olympic-record sprinting and long jumping he just performed, maybe he should give the decathlon a try.

As soon as his feet touched the path, the dragon—along with all of its mythological friends—sank back into the soil.

Griffin bent over, hands braced on his knees. It wasn’t only the exertion that had him breathing like he’d just finished an ultramarathon. Fear and adrenaline were pumping through his veins.

“Are you okay?” Calix rushed to Griffin’s side. “That was….”

“Not good,” Griffin finished. Understatement of the century. “But, yeah, I’m fine.”

Just stupid. He shouldn’t have let his guard down. Ever. He pushed himself upright and turned around, his breath still coming in heavy huffs as he surveyed the field.

“This is worse than not good,” Calix said. “It’s too dangerous. We’ll never make it across.”

The boy was right about one thing. It was worse than not good. It was straight-up bad. And, yes, it was dangerous. But Griffin hadn’t come this far, hadn’t gotten this close to getting his parents and Calix’s immortality back, to just walk away.

“We can do it,” Griffin insisted. “We’re just going to need some help.”

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TEN

“Are you sure she’s coming?” Calix asked.

The boy paced back and forth across the edge of the field, just beyond the mythological barrier.

“She’s coming,” Griffin insisted.

Phoebe wouldn’t let him down. As soon as he realized they needed help getting across the field to the golden tree, he knew exactly who to call. Especially after clarifying with Calix that the oracle had only said they couldn’t use hematheos powers to succeed in the quest. That didn’t mean they couldn’t ask for help from those that had them. After all, Jason had magical help from Medea, Eros, Aphrodite, and Hera herself. They were only staying true to the original quest. Technically.

It had taken a little while to figure out how to get the message to her through means that would have been available to Jason during the original quest. But after a lot of discussion and brainstorming, Calix suggested messenger pigeon.

Not the fastest form of communication, but the bird had done its job. And even delivered a return message.

Now, they were just waiting for Phoebe to arrive.

Since she'd obviously never been to the field of Ares before, she couldn't just autoport to his side. But she promised she'd figure it out. If anyone could find a way, it would be Phoebe. Griffin would bet his life on her.

"It's been a long time," Calix warned. "Maybe she's not coming. Maybe she got lost or—"

"She's coming," Griffin said abruptly. "I prom—"

Before Griffin could finish the sentence, Phoebe materialized before his eyes.

"Hey," he said, his face relaxing into a smile. Until he saw she wasn't alone.

Adara stood at her side. His smile transformed into confusion.

Phoebe must have read the question in his expression because she said, "She knew how to get here. It seemed like the fastest way."

"You're welcome," Adara said, crossing her arms over her chest. "Besides, I want to help."

Because you helped me. Dara didn't have to speak those words for Griffin to know she meant them. They might have been broken up for more than a year now, but they were still good friends. They always would be.

"Of course," Griffin said with a nod. "The more help, the better."

"It's funny you should say that…." Phoebe said, just as Adara autoported away.

Griffin frowned. Before he could ask what she meant, Adara returned. But she wasn't alone. She had their friend Zoe from the track team in tow. The pair immediately autoported away again.

"What's going on?" Griffin asked.

Phoebe shrugged. “When you asked for my help, I thought, Wouldn’t even more help be better? So I… kind of recruited more help. A lot more help.”

Adara and Zoe reautoported to the field, each bringing another track team member with them. As they autoported away again, Griffin finally understood what was happening.

It was the cardinal law of autoportation that you only go somewhere you’d been before. Otherwise, you risked autoporting yourself into an embarrassing or dangerous situation. As soon as someone had autoported to the field, they could return to Serfopoula and bring someone else back with them. Every time they went, their numbers doubled.

A few minutes later, it seemed as if the entire track team had been brought to the field. For a guy who didn’t like to ask for help in the first place, it was a little overwhelming.

But Griffin knew Phoebe was right. Even though he would have preferred to finish this quest on his own—and was maybe more embarrassed than he should have been to have so much support—the most important thing was that it get finished. And with the Academy track team at his side, he felt confident he would succeed.

“Okay,” he said to Calix and the gathered team, “let’s do this.”

The group spent several minutes discussing the course of action. It seemed as if everyone had a suggestion. Neofacturing a mythological army of their own. Visiocrypting themselves into the Olympians. Visiomutating the ground into ice. Each new idea seemed to get more convoluted—and riskier—than the last.

In the end, they agreed that distraction and dispersion was the best option. The more people on the field, the more spread out they were, the better their

chances.

And so they stood, lined up across the end of the field, like they were at the starting line for a race. In a sense, that was exactly what they were doing. Only instead of trying to win the gold medal, they were trying to avoid the fangs and blades of deadly enemies.

Okay, yeah, not really the same at all.

“Whatever you do, be careful,” Griffin called out like a general commanding his troops. “Avoid and evade at any cost. Nothing is worth getting injured over… or worse.”

Phoebe reached out and squeezed his hand. “We’re ready.”

He looked at Calix, who gave him a nervous thumbs up. Griffin nodded.

“On my mark!”

He adjusted his position so that he was slightly in front of Calix.

“Ready!” He drew a slow breath. “Set!”

The racers all braced themselves for the start.

“Go!”

In a flash, everyone else took off. Griffin hesitated a second—maybe two—to give the others a head start. Then he grabbed Calix by the wrist and ran.

As he raced across the field, he saw his fellow runners sprinting and dashing as monsters and immortal soldiers sprang up from the ground. Some of his friends were moving so fast he could only see the blur of their motion. There was a reason their team had so many championship trophies.

But he had to resist the urge to watch. He had to trust that his friends could take care of themselves. They were there for him, to help him succeed, and he wouldn’t let them down.

He wouldn’t stop. Not for anything.

He sprinted through the field, tugging Calix after him. They wove their way across, closer and closer to the golden tree. He was so focused on his destination that he wasn’t aware of anything else.

Which was why he didn’t see the colchian dragon until it was too late. It shot out of the earth like a volcano, blocking such a wide section of their path that Griffin couldn’t adjust and go around. Instead, he skidded to a stop. Other beasts and soldiers encircled them almost instantly, keeping their distance. Almost as if they were giving the dragon first dibs.

His heart pounded, and all he could hear was the sound of blood rushing through his ears. What was he going to do?

He looked to his left. A shoulder-to-shoulder line of warriors, still dripping with the soil they’d sprung up from. He looked to his right. An equally impenetrable front of hybrid monsters—fur, fangs, feathers, and scales—all snarling and snapping at the chance to draw first blood. He didn’t dare look behind him and lose sight of the dragon.

They were surrounded. They were trapped. There was no way through, no way out. Unless he used his powers, there was no way over or under, either.

There was just no way.

The monster had won.

Griffin shoved Calix behind him, shielding the boy from the inevitable strike. But before the beast could launch the attack, Phoebe appeared at Griffin’s side.

“Oh no you don’t,” she said as she held up her hands. “You are not eating my boyfriend today.”

The monster tried to lunge forward, but it seemed to come up against an invisible barrier. Phoebe was holding it back with one of her powers. Aerokinesis, maybe, or telekinesis.

For someone who didn’t even know she had powers a year ago, she was doing a spectacular job.

“Thanks,” Griffin said.

As he spoke, the other creatures started closing in.

“Don’t thank me yet,” she replied, clearly straining to keep the main monster back. She shouted toward the field, “A little help?!”

Within seconds, every member of the team had rushed to Phoebe’s aid. They enclosed Griffin and Calix within a circle of dynamotheos powers.

No monster was getting through that bubble.

“Let’s finish this,” Adara said. “We move as one.”

And they did. Like a team that had trained for the battlefield, not just the racecourse. Step by step, inch by excruciating inch, the group made their way across the field. They didn’t stop until they reached the golden tree. When they arrived, Phoebe and Adara separated, just enough for Griffin and Calix to fit between.

“Oh my goddess,” Calix exclaimed as he slipped through the opening. “We made it!”

Griffin stepped out after him. “Yeah, with a little help from our friends.”

He turned back to give Phoebe, Adara, and the rest of the team an enthusiastic thumbs up. He gasped, mouth hanging open, when he saw what had happened.

The soldiers and monsters that had been relentlessly attacking them had frozen in place, many of them in mid-flight. Hanging in the air like some kind of mythological mobile.

That was more than any hematheos—even an entire group of them—could do.

“Whoa,” Calix said.

Griffin’s friends all released their powers and looked at each other, clearly as confused as he felt.

“What’s going on?” Phoebe asked.

Adara replied, “I don’t know, but it probably won’t last.”

She looked at Griffin, and he nodded. They needed to stay focused until the job was finished.

“Let’s get this done,” he said to Calix.

They approached the golden tree. Griffin took off the pack and carefully removed the Fleece. He held it out to Calix.

“What? No,” the boy said. “I can’t do it. I can’t reach.”

“You have to,” Griffin replied. “It’s your quest, remember?”

Calix looked worried.

Griffin smiled. “I’ll lift you up.”

Calix swallowed hard and nodded.

At the base of the tree, Griffin knelt down so that Calix could climb onto his shoulders. Just like they’d done when they took the Fleece down at Jason’s. He stood up and guided them over to the lowest branch.

“Woohoo!” Phoebe cheered.

The rest of the team clapped and hooted.

“How should I do it?” Calix asked.

Griffin couldn’t shrug. “I don’t know, just… toss it over.”

“Okay…”

Griffin felt Calix adjust to give himself some momentum. Then, with a big grunt, he heaved the Fleece over the branch.

The instant the Fleece landed, the entire grove went silent. Griffin bent down so Calix could drop to the ground. When he turned to look at his friends, they were all as frozen as the soldiers and monsters. Or, rather, as the soldiers and monsters had been. Because every last enemy was gone.

Returning the Fleece to its home must have sent them back to wherever they came from.

Griffin looked up at the branch, only to see the Fleece itself vanish right before his eyes.

“What the—?”

“Um, Griffin…” Calix tugged at his shirt.

He turned around and saw a tall man with dark hair walking across the field. He swept his hands wide, and the crowd of runners split into two halves. Parting like the Red Sea before Moses.

“Well, well, well,” the man said. “Someone finally had the common decency to return my Fleece.”

Calix choked. “Your Fleece?”

Griffin tensed as he realized who they were talking to. The field was named for him, after all, so it shouldn’t have come as a shock that Ares himself would take notice.

The god of war smirked.

“Thank you for bringing it back,” he told them. Then, to Griffin, he said, “It’s nice to finally have a true hero in the family.”

Griffin didn’t know about that. All he had done was help Calix complete the quest. But it still felt good to hear his ancestor god say it.

He smiled at Ares and said, “You’re wel—”

Before Griffin could finish, the god vanished as quickly as he’d arrived. Not one for small talk, apparently. In an instant, the team unfroze and resumed their interrupted cheers.

“You did it!” Phoebe raced forward and wrapped Griffin in a tight hug. “Wait! Where did it go?”

He shook his head. “Ares.”

Phoebe frowned.

“I’ll explain later,” he said. “But don’t worry, it’s done. The quest is complete.”

Phoebe beamed. “I’m so proud of you.”

“Thanks to you,” he said. Then, to the rest of the team, “Thanks to all of you.”

“Well, what are you waiting for?” Adara asked. “Go get your reward.”

“You all will be okay?” he asked, not wanting to leave his team high and dry. Not after they’d showed up and risked so much for him.

“We’ve got this,” Phoebe said, shooing him away. “Now go.”

Griffin smiled, grabbed Calix by the wrist, and—now that the actual questing portion of the quest was over—autoported them back to the base of the oracle’s mountain.

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ELEVEN

Griffin could practically taste victory. He could almost feel his parents' arms around him. He was ready to run full speed up the mountain, present the oracle with their success, and then zap back to Olympus to have Hera perform the unsmoting.

Calix didn't seem to be nearly as excited. He'd been dragging his feet the entire climb.

"Come on," Griffin called out from a rock twenty feet up the mountain from where the boy stood, unmoving, on the path. "We're almost there."

"Are not," Calix countered. He held his hand up to shield his eyes from the glaring sun and looked up at Griffin. "I may have believed you the first time, but this time I know better."

With a frustrated sigh, Griffin jumped down from the rock and jogged back to where Calix had stopped.

"Look, I know this is hard." He wiped a hand over his sweaty brow. "All of this has been hard." That was the understatement of the year. "But we're in the home stretch," he urged. "All we have to do is finish this climb and it's easy sailing from there."

Griffin ignored the wave of nausea that rolled over him at the mention of sailing. He would definitely have to remove that from his vocabulary.

Instead of reassuring or reinvigorating Calix, though, Griffin's words only seemed to upset him. The boy looked like he wanted to throw up.

Griffin clenched his jaw.

He was getting frustrated. Throughout the quest, he'd been as understanding and as sympathetic as possible. He knew Calix wasn't athletically experienced. He knew the boy had led an extremely sheltered life and that this kind of adventure was probably overwhelming. He even knew that they hadn't had nearly enough time for rest along the way.

But Griffin's patience was running out. Getting up this mountain was the last thing standing between him and his parents. He wasn't about to let anyone or anything slow him down.

"I'll carry you," Griffin said.

Without waiting for a response, he moved to Calix's side and bent down.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." Calix danced out of reach. "I'm totally capable of climbing this mountain by myself."

Griffin bit back a growl. His inner mythological monster was begging to be unleashed. He didn't know what was bothering the boy, but he was too impatient to care.

"Then why aren't you?" he snapped.

Calix stared at him for a very long time. The boy's eyes were so carefully guarded that Griffin couldn't get a read on what he was thinking.

Maybe he could use his dynamotheos powers to read Calix's thoughts, though.

He was just about to test out whether psychospection would actually work on the child of the goddess to whom that power belonged when Calix

shrugged and started moving.

The boy didn’t explain, and Griffin didn’t ask. He just fell into step behind him.

Step by step, turn by turn, they slowly made their way up the rocky path. Griffin stayed at Calix’s heels the rest of the way. The boy wouldn’t stop again without Griffin being ready to prod him into motion.

The sun beat down on them as they climbed. If he weren’t fueled by an intense level of adrenaline, Griffin would probably feel just as slow and sluggish as Calix. The past several days had been beyond exhausting. They both deserved a long nap. After he got his parents back.

Motivation had a way of pushing through the fatigue.

Which didn’t explain why the boy wasn’t just as motivated. If Griffin were in his shoes, if he had the chance to gain immortality—especially if that same immortality had been stolen from him—he would be literally dancing up the mountain.

But he couldn’t know what was going on inside Calix’s head. Maybe the boy had come to terms with losing his immortality and now was having to come to terms with regaining it. That was understandable.

“Whoever thought up putting oracles on mountaintops,” Calix complained, “was seriously deranged.”

Griffin smiled. “It was probably your mother.”

“Yeah, probably.” The boy laughed. “That sounds like her.”

The teasing exchange seemed to relax them both. They climbed the rest of the way in casual silence. Heads down, putting one foot in front of the other.

When Calix pulled to a stop again, Griffin was ready to give him a little nudge from behind. Until he realized the boy had stopped for a reason. They had reached the top.

Griffin's heart, already pounding from exertion and elevation, beat even faster. His life was about to change. Everything was about to be better, to be exactly how it was supposed to be. He couldn't keep the grin off his face.

But as he started forward, Calix grabbed his wrist.

"Before we go in there," the boy said, "I just want to say…."

Griffin looked into the young godlet's eyes, surprised to see such sincerity and, maybe, sadness.

"Yeah?"

"Thank you. For… everything you did."

Griffin grinned at him. "You're welcome, buddy." He patted him on the shoulder. "Now, let's get you immortalized."

Turning away from Calix, he jogged over to the cave entrance. When they had first climbed this mountain several days ago, Griffin had been nervous and uncertain. But this time, he knew what to expect.

With a smile on his face, he stepped inside.

Never had he been so wrong. He had no idea what to expect.

"Whoa," Calix said as he stepped into the cave next to Griffin.

The cavern of rainbow prisms they entered through last time had completely transformed. Instead of light glinting in a million colors, the room was almost entirely dark. A thick layer of smoke or mist covered the floor, which seemed to glow purple through the haze.

Whoa was right.

But Griffin wasn't about to let a little redecorating distract him. The basic shape of the room hadn't changed. Which meant he still knew which way to go to find the oracle.

As he made his way through the fog, Griffin wondered how often the chamber changed. How many different appearances did it have? Did it alter for any particular reason, or did the oracle just like to shake things up every so often?

Griffin wasn't about to ask her.

Stepping through the passageway into the chamber with the vision pool, Griffin was relieved to see that everything in there looked the same. Same drippy walls. Same inky black pool. Same wood-nymph-looking oracle sitting on a cushion on the opposite shore.

He made his way up to the pool's edge while Calix stayed by the entrance.

The oracle didn't seem to notice, so he cleared his throat.

She didn't move.

"Excuse me," Griffin said, "Oracle?"

Without opening her eyes, she asked, "Why have you returned?"

"We've finished the boy's quest," he replied. He gestured at Calix, who was hovering in the passageway. "He succeeded."

Her eyes fluttered open.

Suddenly, Griffin knew why the rainbow prisms had gone. Her eyes were now the same dark shade as the shadowy front chamber. Clearly, the two were linked.

"Do you attempt to deceive me?" she roared.

Her voice echoed off the rocky surfaces.

Griffin blinked. "Um, no."

"Then why do you claim to have completed the task set out for you," she howled, "when you have not?"

The way her tone reverberated in the chamber it felt like a punch in the stomach.

“We did complete the task,” Griffin explained. “We returned the Golden Fleece to the field of Ares.”

She speared him with a glare. “Yes, you completed the quest he gave you.” Her gaze shifted to the tunnel where Calix stood. “But not the quest I gave him.”

“I don’t understand,” Griffin said. “That was your quest. Calix said—”

All at once, it fell into place. Block by painful block.

Griffin couldn’t believe he’d been so dense. Now he understood. The quest Calix had given him was not the quest that the oracle had given Calix.

Griffin spun around to face the boy, who cowered against the wall.

“What did you do?” Griffin demanded.

Calix’s eyes widened, and he shook his head.

“Calix…” Griffin felt the menace in his voice, the power of his namesake creature threatening to break loose.

After everything they’d been through, after all the risks and dangers, after getting so close to getting his parents back, it felt like it was all slipping away. Griffin tried to rein in the anger, but it was fighting to escape.

The boy stared at his own feet for several seconds, and when he finally lifted his gaze to meet Griffin’s, his eyes were glassy with unshed tears.

“I lied, okay?” he said, his voice cracking. “I lied about my quest. I made it up.”

“You did what?!” Griffin felt the question roar out of him.

He didn’t think he had ever been so furious in his life. When he lived on Mt. Olympus, he’d witnessed the devastating consequences when the gods let their emotions take control, so he always tried his hardest to keep his own in check. To process things thoughtfully. To think before he acted or reacted.

With Calix’s admission, all of Griffin’s control vanished. Anger coursed through his veins like white-hot lava. He wouldn’t be surprised if steam billowed off of him, his rage burning off the sweat that he’d worked up on the climb.

“I’m sorry,” Calix cried. “I’m so sorry.”

The boy turned and ran away.

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TWELVE

Griffin lost track of how long he stood there, seething. At first, he couldn't even form coherent thoughts. Nothing but his raging emotions existed. It was like the world around him vanished, and he existed only in the space of his own mind.

Gradually, the sharp edges of his anger faded, and rational thought crept back in. Words began to form. Questions. Why, mostly. Why had Calix lied? Why had he made them go through all of that effort—all of that sailing—when they didn't have to? Why hadn't he told Griffin the real quest?

He took several deep breaths, exhaling his fury and inhaling calm. The anger wouldn't help him. He knew that. It wouldn't change anything, either.

Griffin blinked his eyes and, finally, saw the world around him once again. The chamber was empty. The oracle was gone.

How much time had passed? Two minutes? Two hours?

He continued his deep breathing.

When he finally felt in control of the shock and anger, he started for the tunnel. He emerged a few seconds later into the burning daylight.

At first, he didn’t see Calix. He wasn’t sure what he would do if the boy had fled. How would he even find him?

But a quick scan of the area found Hera’s son perched on a large rock at the edge of the clearing. He sat hunched over, curled up into a tight ball with his knees hugged up to his chest. Like a frightened animal.

Griffin’s heart twinged with guilt.

He didn’t understand why, but the sight of Calix looking so small and vulnerable washed away the last remnants of his anger. All that was left was disappointment and questions.

Making his way across the clearing, Griffin approached the rock. As he did, he saw that Calix held a flower—a tiny white daisy, it looked like—carefully between his fingers. Griffin didn’t know what to say. He didn’t know how to act. So he stood there, watching.

After several moments, Calix broke the silence.

“I didn’t mean to,” he whispered.

Griffin drew in a shaky breath. He kept his tone level as he asked, “Didn’t mean to what?”

“Lie.” The boy looked up from the flower, his eyes red with tears. “About the quest.”

“Then why did you?”

Calix shrugged, and his face scrunched up like he was going to cry some more.

Letting out a deep sigh, Griffin climbed up on the rock and sat down next to him.

“Tell me,” he said. “It will make you feel better.”

Calix nodded and kept his gaze trained on the flower. “When we looked into the pool, when the oracle showed us what we want most?”

“Yeah?”

“What did you see?”

Griffin immediately pictured the image he’d seen of his family—he and his parents reunited. Even remembering that vision made his heart ache with longing.

“I saw…” He shook his head. “I saw my parents, unsmoted and back in the world.”

The boy nodded, and tears glistened in his eyes.

Griffin was almost afraid to ask.

“What did you see?”

Calix sniffed. “I saw my deathbed.”

“What?” Griffin jerked back.

The boy hadn’t seemed depressed or like he had a death wish. He was a little melancholy and emotional, sure. But death?

Griffin inched a little closer on the rock. He didn’t quite feel comfortable putting his arm around Calix’s shaking shoulders, but he wanted to be within reach.

“Why?” Griffin asked. “Why is that your greatest desire?”

“Oh, I don’t mean it like that,” Calix said with a sad smile. “It’s not anytime soon. It’s just… someday. Not never.”

Not never? The realization hit him like Zeus’s lightning bolt. The vision wasn’t about depression or even death.

“Mortality,” Griffin said.

He didn’t have to ask it as a question because he already knew it was the answer.

The boy nodded. “Mortality.”

Calix’s greatest desire was mortality.

They sat in silence for several long seconds while Griffin let the thoughts race through his mind. All this time, he’d been so singularly focused on his own goal that he hadn’t stopped for one moment to think about Calix’s goals. He didn’t think anyone had. And they certainly had never asked the boy.

With a knowing sigh, Griffin asked, “You don’t want your immortality back, do you?”

It was a question he should have asked much earlier in their relationship. Like before he dragged the boy off Mt. Olympus and pulled him into this quest for something he never wanted.

Griffin rested his elbows on his knees and stared off across the valley.

“Why didn’t you say something, Calix?”

“I wanted to,” the boy said. “I mean, I almost said it a million times.”

“But?”

“I felt so bad about your parents.”

The laugh exploded out of Griffin. He had stolen the boy’s immortality, but Calix was the one who felt bad for him. Talk about misplaced guilt.

“You wanted them back so bad, and I wanted to help you do that, but….” His voice trailed off, and then he added in a whisper, “No one ever listens to me, anyway. I didn’t think telling you the truth would make a difference.”

“So instead you invented a crazy quest?”

Calix twirled the daisy between his fingertips. “Not crazy, just…”

“Impossible?” Griffin guessed.

The boy nodded. “I thought maybe it’d be easier to fail than to not try all.”

Would it have been? Because they’d completed the impossible quest, Griffin didn’t have to find out. As things stood, it felt pretty terrible either way. But that was the problem. How it made him feel wasn’t the only thing that mattered.

“Your mom doesn’t know?” he asked.

What a dumb question. Of course she didn’t know. Otherwise she wouldn’t have sent them on this fool’s quest.

Then again, maybe she would have. The gods didn’t seem to care what anyone else wanted when it didn’t coincide with their own wishes.

Calix tucked the flower he had been playing with into the lace of his boot. “It always seemed so important to her, like it was this big black mark on my soul that I’d lost my immortality.”

“But it’s… immortality, dude. Who wouldn’t want that?”

“I’ve seen what it does to them, to my aunts and uncles—even my mom. It’s made them… cold, heartless. Sometimes cruel. The things I’ve seen them do….” Calix shuddered at the thought. “I don’t ever want to be like that.”

Griffin had never considered it that way. He’d only ever imagined that immortality would be an endless party, where you got to do whatever you wanted without worrying about repercussions or consequences.

He’d never stopped to think that maybe repercussions and consequences were a good thing. That they made you care. That they made you… human.

He’d always thought immortality made you more than human. But now he realized it could actually make you less than human, too.

“I know it’s silly,” Calix said, pulling his knees tighter up against his chest. “I’m just being selfish when this one little thing will bring your parents back.”

Once again, Griffin was stunned. The level of kindness in this kid was unreal. How on Olympus had Hera produced such a great offspring?

A wave of understanding washed over him, and suddenly everything became crystal clear. All his life, Griffin had believed that being a hero meant doing something crazy courageous or super dangerous. Like saving a village from a dragon or rescuing a helpless kitten from a burning building. And maybe doing those things was heroic. But there was another kind of heroic. Another kind of hero.

Sometimes being a hero meant caring more about what someone else needs than what you want. And he was ready to become that kind of hero.

“No, you’re wrong,” Griffin told him. “You’re not the one being selfish. I am.”

And it was about time he did something about it.

Calix turned and looked at him.

Griffin explained, “I was so focused on my own goal that I didn’t stop to ask you about yours.”

“But—”

“Let’s go.” Griffin pushed to his feet before the boy could argue.

Calix stood. “Where?”

Griffin held out his hand, and the boy took it without question.

“Back,” he said, “to Mt. Olympus.”

In a flash, they were gone.

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THIRTEEN

“You really don’t have to do this,” Calix insisted as he followed Griffin through the marble halls.

“Yeah,” Griffin replied, “I really do.”

It was time somebody stood up for the boy, since he clearly wasn’t prepared to stand up for himself. Considering Griffin was the one who got them in this situation in the first place, it was only fitting that he be the one to end it.

Calix grabbed him by the arm. “Wait.”

Griffin stopped and faced him.

“I….” The boy’s face twisted into a pained expression. “She’s gonna be super mad.”

Some of Griffin’s impatience faded. He was doing it again. Taking a decision about Calix’s life out of the boy’s own hands.

He wouldn’t repeat that mistake.

“Better that she be mad for a little while right now,” he replied, “than you do something you regret for the rest of your very, very, very long life.”

“Well, when you put it that way….”

“And wouldn’t you rather face her with me at your side?”

Calix actually smiled. “Of course.”

Griffin raised his eyebrows in silent question. He wasn’t going to force Calix to take this step, but he hoped the boy had the courage to choose for himself.

“Okay,” Calix said. “Let’s do it!”

Griffin winked and pushed open the door to Hera’s office. Agnes looked up and grinned when she saw them.

“You’re back!” Her gaze shifted to Calix with genuine affection. “And you’re…” Her eyes snapped back to Griffin. “He’s still mortal.”

He’s standing right here, Griffin wanted to say. He had a feeling that Calix had spent most of his life being talked about instead of talked with. Griffin hoped they were about to change that.

But Hera’s assistant wasn’t where the problem stemmed from. They needed to start at the top.

Drawing in a deep breath, Griffin squared his shoulders as he said, “We need to see the queen.”

The look on Agnes’s face told him exactly what kind of reception he could expect from Hera. The raging fury of a thousand harpies came to mind. He was prepared to face it. It was no less than what Griffin expected.

“Right. I’ll just…” Agnes glanced uncomfortably at Hera’s door. “She’s free right now. Why don’t you go on in?”

“Right now?”

Griffin wasn’t too proud to admit that his voice cracked.

Considering how long he'd had to wait to see Hera in the first place, he assumed they would have some time to talk through the plan. To make a strategy. To get the butterflies in his stomach under control.

He hadn't expected to get right in.

But it wasn't like there was a good time to tell the goddess queen that he wouldn't be helping her son regain his immortality. It would never be easy. He swallowed his nerves, flashed Agnes a hopeful smile, and started for the door.

"If you need me," Agnes said, "I'll be on my break. In the library."

Which, if Griffin recalled, was on the completely opposite side of Mt. Olympus from Hera's office. Surely Agnes knew that there would be no safe distance from Hera's wrath, but any space was better than none.

Griffin nodded and opened the door.

Hera sat behind her desk, just as she had been the first time he walked in several days ago. She was studiously bent over some papers, smiling. Another smoting? Some perverse punishment or torture decree? Ruining some other mortal's life?

He could only imagine what kind of horrible thing had put that smile on her face. Well, he was about to wipe it off.

As much as he wanted to hide in the corner until the goddess noticed him, he wanted to be a good example for Calix even more. He wanted to show the boy that there wasn't anything to be afraid of. That facing your fears was better than hiding from them.

If only he believed that to be true in that exact moment.

But rather than quake and cower, he met the problem head-on.

"Hera, we're back," he said.

The goddess looked up, her face a picture of pure joy. He had never seen her—or any of the Olympians, really—look that truly happy. He almost felt bad that it wouldn't last.

"We, um," he fumbled for the words and gestured at Calix. "We need to tell you something."

The boy looked white as the marble decorating his mother's office.

Griffin cleared his throat. "I need to tell you something."

Hera's gaze shifted to her son. In an instant, her joy was gone.

"He is still mortal!" she roared.

Griffin swallowed hard. "That's what I need to tell you."

"Why have you returned?!" She gestured at her son like he was a show dog who'd pooped on the carpet. "You have failed."

Torn between moving closer to Calix—to shield the boy from his mother's ire—and moving closer to Hera—in the hopes that she might actually stop shouting—he stood his ground in the middle.

"You're right," Griffin replied. "He is still mortal."

Hera stared at her son with a mix of disdain and disappointment.

"And—" Griffin cleared his parched throat again. He really needed to bring a water bottle next time he sought an audience on Olympus. "And he's going to stay mortal."

Hera's gaze snapped back to Griffin.

"What do you mean? Did the oracle refuse his request?"

He wouldn't want to be in the oracle's shoes if that were the case.

"No," Griffin said. "He chooses to stay mortal."

Hera’s jaw dropped. She was literally speechless. She stared at Griffin as if he were some alien creature that she just couldn’t comprehend.

Finally, something clicked in her brain.

“Absolutely not,” she said, turning to face her son. “You do not get to choose mortality.”

When she started toward Calix, Griffin moved into her path. Maybe it was stupid, standing up to a goddess like that, but in that moment, Griffin didn’t think about himself. He only cared about protecting Calix.

“Move,” Hera commanded.

Griffin stood his ground. “No.”

“Move,” she said again, “or I shall move you.”

“You’ll have to smote me.” He braced himself for her reaction. “You can’t force that kind of decision on someone.”

She reared back. “You did!”

“And I won’t do it again,” Griffin said calmly.

“I’m warning you.” Hera raised her hands. “If you do not move this instant __”

“Mom, no!”

Calix darted out from behind and placed himself between Griffin and the enraged goddess. She froze. He was quaking in his boots, but he stood his ground.

Griffin had never been more proud.

“This isn’t Griffin’s fault,” the boy said. “I… I don’t want immortality.”

“Nonsense.” She grabbed Calix by the wrist. “I shall take you to the oracle myself and make her return your immortality.”

“She won’t give it to me,” Calix said. “Not unless I ask for it.”

“Then ask for it!” Hera shouted.

Calix bit his lips and shook his head.

“You!” She whirled on Griffin. “How could you let this happen?”

He fought the urge to back away. If Calix could face his furious mother with quiet courage, so could Griffin. “I didn’t let any—”

“This is your fault!” Hera jabbed a finger into his chest. “You did this!”

“Ask him why, Hera,” he replied calmly.

“It doesn’t matter why,” she cried. “Do you know what will happen if he doesn’t regain his immortality?”

That sounded like a rhetorical question, so Griffin didn’t think it needed an answer.

Hera disagreed. She demanded, “Do you?”

“I’ll die,” Calix whispered.

She glanced at her son, her eyes red around the edges.

“Exactly. You’ll die,” she whispered. “And I’ll have to watch you.”

Griffin jerked back. He finally realized exactly what was going on. All this time, he thought Hera was ashamed of her son. That she felt like a fool for having a mortal child. But that wasn’t it at all.

She was afraid. She didn’t want to go through the pain of having to watch her son grow old or get sick. She didn’t want to have to grieve.

In a flash, Griffin totally understood where she was coming from. If he had a choice, he wouldn’t ever watch someone he loved suffer, either.

That was the catch, though. It wasn’t his choice. It wasn’t even Hera’s choice.

It was Calix’s choice. And the boy had chosen.

“It hurts,” Griffin said, expressing a shared pain. “Doesn’t it?”

When Hera looked at him, her eyes glistened. She didn’t have to answer. It was clear in her expression.

Which was the very thing that Calix wanted. He wanted her to feel… something. Anything.

The gods weren’t as heartless as they pretended to be.

“I won’t do it,” he told Hera. “I forced your son to give up immortality. I won’t force him to take it back. And you shouldn’t either.”

With that, he turned and walked out of her office.

He might have destroyed his chances of ever seeing his parents again, but at least he knew he was doing the right thing. Which was what being a hero was really about. Making the right choice even when it’s hard. He had to believe that his parents would have been proud.

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FOURTEEN

There was nothing left to do on Mt. Olympus, but Griffin wasn’t ready to go home yet. Going home would mean accepting the reality that he would never see his parents again. Going home would mean facing his failure. He didn’t want to change his decision, but he wasn’t quite ready to live with it.

He knew he couldn’t stay forever, but he could delay his return to reality for a little while.

When he’d played there as a child, he discovered many secrets in the home of the gods. Hidden passageways and invisible doors. Rooms filled with treasure and others with magical artifacts. It was a place of unimaginable wonder.

Above all else, there was one find that he loved the most. The Fountain of Iris.

Now seemed like as good a time as any for a visit. Especially since he didn’t know when—or even if—he would ever be back. It wasn’t like Hera was going to roll out the welcome mat.

The fountain sat in the center of the main courtyard. Not far from where, just a few days ago, he’d found Calix sitting on a railing, reading Sappho, and blissfully unaware of what his mother had planned.

As Griffin followed the winding path through the trees, passing a trio of frolicking wood nymphs who giggled as he walked by, he felt a sense of calm come over him. He may have lost the chance to see his parents, but this time he made the choice himself. This time, he knew what he was doing and why.

It didn't make him particularly happy. But it didn't leave him particularly devastated, either.

It just… was.

He'd made the right decision, and, even though the consequences were painful, he could live with them.

When he emerged into the clearing that held the fountain, he drew in a deep breath. He felt his every last ounce of sadness drain away, replaced by a kind of subtle euphoria. That was the power of Iris's fountain.

Ordinary fountains bubbled water. The fountain created by the goddess of rainbows, however, bubbled color. It felt like stepping into a kaleidoscope. Rays of all possible hues on the spectrum shot through the air and bounced across every surface the beams touched.

It reminded him of the way the oracle's entrance had sparkled with rainbow prisms on their first visit.

The fountain itself was an ever-changing parade of colors. As if somewhere inside, a giant disco ball was flashing multi-colored light in every direction.

Griffin walked up to the fountain and sat down on the edge.

He resisted the temptation to trail his hand through the pool of color in the fountain's base. The one time he'd tried that, his whole arm was purple for a month. He'd like to keep his flesh skin-colored, thank you very much.

Instead, he just inhaled the pure joy of the living rainbow.

A rustle in the trees drew his attention. He looked up and saw the pegasus emerging into the clearing. The flying horse hesitated when it saw the area

was occupied, but then shook its head and kept walking.

Griffin smiled as the beast walked up and nuzzled at his shoulder.

Maybe the pegasus remembered that Griffin used to sneak it sugar cubes all those years ago. Or maybe it sensed that he could use a bit of affection at the moment. Griffin reached up and scratched under the horse's chin and allowed himself to get lost in thought.

It was easier to get lost in his thoughts than actually face them.

He didn't know how long he'd been sitting there—time kind of seemed to alter within reach of the fountain—when another rustle sounded through the trees. Griffin fully expected to see the unicorn joining the rainbow party.

He was shocked to see Hera emerge. And even more stunned to see that she didn't look angry.

The goddess stepped into the clearing and then froze. She looked around her, at the streaks of colored light landing on every surface—especially bright against the pristine white fabric of her dress—as if startled to see them.

She held out her hand and studied how the colors played across her skin

"It has been quite some time since I ventured into the courtyard," she said. "I had forgotten about Iris's fountain."

The goddess queen couldn't keep the grin off her face.

Griffin tried and failed to hide his own smile. It was weird to see Hera finding joy in something so simple, as if she were a child again—if the immortals ever were children in the first place.

Apparently done playing with the rainbows, Hera cleared her throat and crossed to the fountain. She sat down on the edge next to Griffin.

She got right to the point.

“I was quite angry back in my office,” she said.

Griffin huffed out a small laugh. “I noticed.”

“I had not, until that moment, truly faced my….” She seemed to search for the word. “Feelings regarding Calix’s mortality.”

Feelings was an understatement, but Griffin was going to let it slide. The goddess seemed to be in a relatively good mood, and he didn’t want to ruin it. Who knew how many innocent mortals and hematheos might be smoted if he did?

“I realize that I have been taking it out on the child,” she continued. “And that is fair neither to him, nor to me.”

It was refreshing to hear the goddess speak so openly about her emotions and her actions. The gods weren’t too fond of accepting responsibility for anything. But Hera seemed to be really thinking about her behavior and what it meant for Calix.

Her honesty was tickling Griffin’s guilt over how his own actions had affected the boy’s life. His decade-old guilt resurfaced.

“I really am sorry,” he told her. “For what I did back then and for not being able to change it now.”

She looked at him with one brow cocked. “Able?”

“Okay, willing,” he corrected. “For not being willing to change it back now.”

She made a sound, something like a disgruntled hmph, and shrugged.

“It is what it is,” she said. “There may yet be a silver lining to your disobedience.”

“What’s that?”

She collected her hands carefully in her lap. “You have made me realize that I was wrong to force my will on Calix. I may not agree with his decision—and I hope, in time, he will change his mind—but I must respect that it is his decision.”

Griffin was impressed. He’d never known Hera to be so reasonable. It almost made him worry that the other shoe was about to drop.

“What you did…” she began, then shook her head.

Griffin cringed, expecting a punishment of some sort.

“Calix and I have spent the last hour talking. Just… talking.” She sounded amazed. “Not arguing or bickering. Just talking.”

She turned to look at Griffin, who used every available ounce of willpower to keep from flinching away.

“Thank you,” she said.

His jaw dropped. “For what?”

“For giving me back a relationship I hadn’t realized was lost. For making me see that I have spent so long wishing for him to be different, that I hadn’t seen him for the wonderful young man he has become.”

“Oh,” Griffin replied, not sure exactly what to say. Since she had thanked him, he could only reply, “You’re welcome?”

Hera fell silent and went back to studying the rainbows. Griffin tried to process everything she had said.

Something very important suddenly made sense to him. Sometimes you wished for other people to be different than they were. Hera wished her son was still immortal. Griffin wished his parents hadn’t taken responsibility for his actions. But now he understood. He could no more have forced his parents to make a different choice in the past than he could force Calix to make one now. Even if he could, he wouldn’t want to.

In a heartbeat, a decade of anger washed out of him.

He braced his hands on the edge of the fountain. If he weren't already sitting, he would have fallen to the ground.

He never realized how angry he'd been. Not at Olympus—he'd been crystal clear about his fury directed at the gods—but at his parents. At their decision to sacrifice themselves for him, thereby condemning him to a lifetime of guilt. He hadn't ever considered it from their perspective.

How could he expect them to choose to let him suffer Hera's wrath and condemn themselves to that same guilt?

All this time, he thought he was being selfless to wish they'd chosen differently. Now he realized that what he really wanted was to transfer his own guilt to them. As if his was more important or valid than theirs. How unheroic was that?

Hera cleared her throat. "I have an additional favor to ask of you."

"What kind of favor?"

"Calix wishes to attend The Academy." She let out a long-suffering sigh. "I shall make the arrangements, of course, but…."

He waited for the uppercut. She wanted him to talk Calix out of it. Or make sure he didn't want to stay once he got there. Or the gods knew what?

So he was utterly shocked when she asked, "Would you keep an eye on him? Make sure he is… happy?"

"Of course," he said without hesitation.

Hera smiled gently and nodded.

"Thank you." She pushed up to her feet. "Even though you did not meet the terms of our agreement, I wish to repay you."

"You don't need to," he told her.

“But I wish to,” she said as she started across the clearing. “I may have been less than forthright with you when I implied that a smoting could be reversed.”

“Implied?”

Hera shrugged. “Very well, stated.”

Griffin wasn’t sure whether he felt betrayed that she had led him on or relieved to know that he hadn’t truly failed because success hadn’t even been possible.

Hera didn’t seem to care either way.

“But I can grant a kind of temporary reprieve,” she explained. “Each year, on this date and in this place, your parents shall be allowed a one-hour visitation. With you and you alone.”

Griffin’s heart pounded like a thunderclap, and his eyes filled with tears.

“They shall be here momentarily.”

Before he could process those words enough to form a response, the goddess disappeared into the trees.

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FIFTEEN

Griffin pushed to his feet. Sat back down. Stood again.

He felt like a little boy of seven again—his age when he last saw his parents—not the young man of almost nineteen that he actually was. He couldn't remember ever feeling quite so excited. Or terrified. Or on the verge of passing out.

This was worse than the ultramarathon.

His palms itched. He found himself looking around the clearing, waiting for any sign that his parents had arrived. Jumping at every sound.

Growing impatient, he decided to jog around the fountain a few times. Maybe his parents were on the other side. Even if they weren't, the exercise would help him calm down. Phoebe would be proud.

On his third lap through the rainbows, his parents materialized right before his eyes.

He jerked to a stop and froze. His mom and dad looked exactly how he'd seen them in the oracle's vision. Both were older than he remembered, with graying hair and faint lines tugging at their eyes.

“Griffin?” his mother asked, sounding as confused as she looked.

Her voice cracked, as if it hadn’t been used for a long time. His father looked just as bewildered. A surprising state for the man who had always seemed to have an answer for everything.

Griffin couldn’t keep the tears from his eyes as he exclaimed, “I’ve missed you both so much.”

In a heartbeat, he was in their arms. The three of them hugged each other so tight it felt like they could squeeze out the entire world. It had been way too long since Griffin felt their arms around him. He wasn’t sure which seemed more unbelievable—that it had been more than a decade already or that he was finally experiencing it again.

“My darling boy,” his mother cooed. “You are so grown up.”

She squeezed him harder, if that was even possible.

“It’s been a long time,” he replied through the tears.

“How long?” his father asked, leaning back slightly.

Griffin looked his father in the eyes—the same golden brown as his own—and felt the shame of the past flush his cheeks.

“Eleven years,” Griffin said. “It’s been almost eleven years.”

His father shook his head, as if he couldn’t quite believe it had been that long. Maybe for them, it hadn’t. Maybe in the state of suspended animation they’d been in—if Hera had been honest about that part—it only felt like a flash.

Griffin envied them that.

As his father pulled out of the hug and turned to take in their environment, Griffin’s mom studied his face.

“You are so very handsome.” She pressed her palms to his cheeks, her eyes seeming to devour his every feature. Like she was trying to memorize them.

“Not to put too fine a point on it,” his father said, “but how exactly did we get here?”

Griffin quickly gave them a recap of the deal with Hera, the quest, and the results. He didn’t want to waste time talking about that when they only had an hour. They had so many more important things to say and do.

Starting with telling them the thought that had been haunting him for the past decade. The one thing that he couldn’t—wouldn’t—leave unsaid.

“I’m sorry,” he told them both. “I’m so sorry you were punished in my place. If I could go back, I would change all of it.”

His father shook his head. “You have nothing to apologize for.”

“We couldn’t have lived with seeing you punished,” his mother added, tears in her eyes. “There was no other choice.”

“I know,” Griffin replied, wiping at his own tears. “I understand that now. And it makes me appreciate your sacrifice even more.”

He felt so full of pride and joy that he almost couldn’t contain it. Then his mother was hugging him again, squeezing as much of her own joy into the moment as she could.

“How long do we have?” his father asked.

It pained Griffin to say, “Only an hour.”

His father looked crestfallen.

“But Hera said we’ll have this hour every year,” Griffin added.

“One hour per year,” his father said. “That isn’t very long.”

His mother said, “Then we’ll have to fit a lifetime into each hour.”

She guided Griffin over to a stone bench at the edge of the clearing and urged him to sit down. When he did, she sat next to him and his father stood before them.

“Tell us everything,” she said. “Tell us all about your life for the past eleven years.”

And so he did. He told them in as much detail as he could, as quickly as possible. He told them about how Aunt Lili had raised him, how he loved helping her at the bakery, how she made sure he never wanted for anything. He told them about his athletic accomplishments, how he loved running and was really very good at it. He told them about school and friends and, finally, he told them about Phoebe.

“She’s the one,” he told his mom. “The one the oracle told you about.”

“The daughter of victory?” she guessed.

He nodded. “She is literally Nike’s great-granddaughter.”

His mother threw back her head and laughed. It was the most joyous, sparkling sound he had ever heard. Even his father joined in. His father had never been a grouch by any means, but he rarely straight-up laughed.

As they kept talking, Griffin refused to think about the ticking clock. He refused to waste one moment of their time together worrying about when it would end or wishing for even one second longer.

There would be time for that later.

For now, he was hanging out with, talking to, and laughing with his parents. And that was almost the best reward that Hera could have granted him. He was greedy enough to want more—more than an hour per year, more than a restricted visit. He wanted them to meet Phoebe. He wanted them to see him run. He wanted them to be there when he needed advice or had exciting news to share. He wanted it all.

But for now, one hour would be enough.

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MAP

Download a printable map of Griffin's quest at teralynnchilds.com/nsh-map

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Dear reader,

When I wrote the final scene of Goddess in Time, I knew that Griffin's story had to come next. I hope you loved reading about his heroic quest as much as I loved writing about it.

If you did, please share your love by leaving a review.

To get breaking news, exclusive giveaways, and early access to new stories, visit teralynnchilds.com/subscribe to join my mailing list.

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THANK YOUS

Griffin’s story never would have come together without my Mythfit beta and gamma readers. Thank you Camden, Chelsea, Deaidre, Jodi, Katerina, Nicole, Rachel, and Sara. And especially Deborah, who gave me just the kick in the pants I needed to make this an awesome book! Thank you!!!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

TERA LYNN CHILDS may pretend to be a goddess, but she's really just a normal person. Well, maybe not normal. She is a writer, after all. Her works include the mythology-based Oh. My. Gods. series, the Forgive My Fins mermaid romance series, the kick-butt monster-hunting Sweet Venom trilogy, and the Darkly Fae fantasy series. Tera currently parks her laptop in the Seattle area and spends her time writing wherever she can find a comfy chair and a steady stream of caffeinated beverages. Learn more about her magical realms and find behind-the-book extras at teralynnchilds.com.

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ISBN 978-1-946345-10-3 (ebook)

ISBN 978-1-946345-11-0 (hardcover)

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